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The Fadable Girl

by

L.A. Alexandra Pope

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Department of English

Edmonton, Alberta

Fall, 1995

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled The Fadable Girl submitted by L.A. Alexandra Pope in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Abstract

In this short novel set in the mid-eighties, a pregnant woman returns to her home town of Toronto to have her child. Back in her mother's house, she relives memories surrounding the death of her irate father, Jake. Fearing her own unsuitability as a parent, Andrea considers giving the child up for adoption. But after meeting a prospective couple, she changes her mind.

Shortly after the birth, Andrea becomes accutely depressed and leaves her daughter Ursula with Ursula's grandmother. Bent upon forgetting her child, Andrea attempts to find solace in a battery of lovers just as a rumoured plague hits the city.

Finally, during a visit to her sister in Vancouver, Andrea is forced to recognize the effects of her abandonment.

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Many thanks to Greg Hollingshead for his insightful and painstaking editorial efforts. His thoughtful advice proved invaluable, though it sometimes took me a while to follow it.

I will be forever grateful to Greg McElligott for never letting me talk my way out of it. Without his constant faith, this little story might never have seen the light of day.

Finally, thanks to Zoe and Zach who have taught me all I know about being a mother.

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PART ONE

Chapter 1

She usually appeared in the mornings, like a whisper. A whisper finding its shape in the tiny black cracks in my bedroom wall. Hands thrust deep in the pockets of her overalls, feet bouncing joyfully from left to right, her expression never varied. A curly-haired girl about two with smooth skin and a large crinkly smile. She came often, when the morning light hadn't yet pressed through the blinds, and the street was so still that it didn't belong to the city.

One morning she receded as quickly as she had emerged, disappearing behind the paint as if by suction. It was clear that she had become lodged inside the wall, an arm trapped in old wiring, a leg sunk in wood rot. I almost reached out to her. . . .

Then I was suddenly, fully awake. I had slept in again, but this had done nothing to relieve the fatigue. Feeling faintly sick, I dragged myself out of bed and down the corridor into the kitchen.

The room was filled with the smell of damp air. It was already mid-morning, but the grey light made it feel like dawn. I closed the porch door which I had left open overnight by mistake, and put the kettle on. Then I phoned Averie to see if she would come over.

"Sorry, hon," said Averie in a cavalier tone. "I've got to be at work in--oh my--fifteen minutes. It's a good thing you called. Isaiah and I were just falling back to sleep." I could hear a muffled "Yo Andrea" in the background, then Averie giggling into the receiver.

"I could drop by after work, though," Averie volunteered.

I hung up the phone and looked at my watch. It was 10:15. I had eight more hours to fill. I took the whining kettle off the stove and searched the cupboards for coffee.

September already smelt like winter. The Montreal sky, leaden and oppressive since the middle of August, had drained the city of its colours. The vegetable stalls and used clothes racks that lined the street were washed in the same dingy shade of grey. And the storefronts, paler than usual, and uninviting, looked as if their owners had reconsidered things and decided to close for the season. In the alleys there was more than the usual amount of

stray garbage smelling of rotting fish and over-ripe fruit.

I passed the dry-goods store with its display of mock Italian leather hanging in an elaborate web, and entered the Greek grocer's. His was the only place that carried it: Brazilian coffee ground so fine it shot arrows through my veins. I grabbed some Craven A's and the Saturday Globe. Though the national edition was ludicrously slim, hardly a morning's read, it was from home and contained no news of Quebec.

Averie arrived after six. In one hand she held a single pink rose from the shop where she worked and in the other a bottle of Campari.

"You're late, right?" she asked, handing me the rose.

"Oh, just a tad there, Averie," I replied, closing the door behind her.

"No better time then for Campari and Soda. Got any ice?" She was already halfway down the corridor, her heels clicking against the hardwood.

"Yeah, help yourself," I yelled after her. "You know where the glasses are." I spun the rose in my hand. It wasn't yet in full bloom but already its outer petals were turning a pale brown and curling around the edges.

When I got into the kitchen, Averie had poured us each a drink and was standing with one arm wrapped around her waist, her Campari glass pressed meditatively against her cheek. Her auburn hair had been pulled up in a loose bun to expose silver coin earrings that looked pink in the evening light. In Isaiah's old bottle-green fisherman's sweater and a brown leather miniskirt, Averie had a certain bohemian elegance.

"Here's to the little one," she said raising her glass. "Bottoms up."

"You're taking this pretty lightly," I said, reaching for the other glass.

"Drink brings on the old menstrual flow, Andy. Loosens up the ovaries and lets them rip. Prost!" Averie had knocked back half her drink. I was still staring suspiciously at mine.

"I think it's a little late for menstrual flow, Averie," I said, sitting down at the table.

Slowly Averie put down her glass and joined me. For the first time since her arrival, she wasn't smiling. "What do you know?" she asked, placing an uncharacteristically maternal hand on my knee.

"Oh, that I'm about six weeks along."

Blank-faced, Averie sat back in her seat and brushed back a strand of hair that had fallen out of her bun. "When did you find out?"

"Yesterday afternoon. It was my second time in." I paused to light a cigarette. "They dropped the first sample, you know. Can you believe it?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean river of pee on the floor of the Montreal General."

Averie tucked her feet under her chair and gave out a high-pitched laugh.

"So it's official," I said, taking a sip of Campari. It tasted bitter, but it killed the panic that was rising in my throat. I drank some more.

Averie seemed to be trying to read my expression but the Campari went straight to my head, and soon I could only grin.

"Have you thought of any names?" she asked, trying to sound helpful while prying open a bobby pin with her mouth.

"Sure. Jonathan if it's a boy and Artemis if it's a girl."

"Artemis." She paused reflectively. "Arty Miss. I like it," she said and poured us each another glass of Campari.

By quarter to seven, I'd had three drinks and my perspective had shifted considerably. This was wonderful, Averie and I had decided. Why not? As good a time as any. I was young, relatively fit, certainly at the peak of my fertility, and likely to have released a quality, top-of-the-line ovum. I was going to have a baby. This was the kind of news people celebrated.

Averie and I manoeuvred our way back down the corridor, grasping the wall occasionally for support, and headed out the door into the brisk evening air. I didn't bother with a jacket. I wanted the cold to wake me up, sober up my limbs and head, clear the fog behind my eyes. Besides, the restaurant was only a block and a half away, hugging the corner of St. Viateur and Jeanne Mance. Averie was walking me there on her way to the bus that would take her home to Isaiah.

When we got to the back door of L'Herberie, Averie turned to go. She'd walked about ten feet when she stopped. "By the way," she asked, "does he know?"

I rubbed the base of my shoe against the gravel. "He knows, all right." I resented Averie's introduction of gritty details when I was still high on our unblemished anticipation.

"Oh, well, okay then," she answered and headed down the street, waving a regal hand in the air.

I didn't know what she meant, but I didn't bother to ask. She'd already punctured my mood, and my shift was about to begin. I pulled the thick wooden handle and went inside.

Before I had even crossed the threshold, the smell of tofu and tahini hit my nostrils. Though we were well into the eighties, L'Herberie hailed from another time and place. With its heavy reliance on spider plants and Afghani wall hangings, it had an early seventies Northern California feel. Fittingly, the owner perfected an ad-lib approach to restaurant procedures. Whenever you asked Steven about the menu, he tended to pause and behind his wire-rim glasses gaze reflectively.

Open barely two months and filled to capacity every night, it was already rumoured among the waiters that the restaurant was losing money. This surprised none of us. Steven liked to feed people but had trouble charging them. His $3.50 dinner special had the neighbourhood lining up by six, but the price barely covered food cost. And naturally, all the staff ate for free.

The kitchen was run by a former country singer from Texas who didn't eat eggs because she said they clogged her brain. Sipping on dandelion root tea at the end of a

shift, her slight body perched on a stool, Louise would deliberate, for the benefit of those in earshot, on the Yin and Yang of foods and on the general evils of the Western diet. In Steven's kitchen, however, she was forced to ease up on her beliefs, conceding that her own diet, made up almost exclusively of aduki beans and kelp, might not appeal to a less enlightened public.

Tonight's special was vegetarian meat balls on buckwheat spaghetti. She'd made a tomato sauce as well, although she complained, as she stirred it mournfully, that it was far too "yinnie" for a cold autumn night. As I entered the kitchen, Louise sniffed me suspiciously.

I remember I was serving my fifth buckwheat special when my vision started to blur and my hands became wet with perspiration. Someone at the table was ordering more soya milk but all I could think of was getting some air. The muffled background sitar music was buzzing in my ears as I squeezed through the line that had formed at the door and pushed my way outside. I leaned one hand on a lamppost and was violently ill. Only when I looked up into the hazy orange light did I notice the rain. It was falling in sharp determined streaks, and my hair and the back of my shirt were soaked. I remember holding my stomach and shaking uncontrollably, wishing it were 1980 and that I could start all over again.

Chapter 2

While most of the Campari ended up that night on the sidewalk, the nausea settled in for the winter. It was with me when I woke up each morning and it followed me around throughout the day, like a nudging reminder of my situation. At night, the sea-sick sway of my pillow kept me awake, and I hung onto the side of my mattress just to keep horizontal, or from falling off.

The day sickness made it difficult to breathe. My lungs took in air reluctantly, as if it were a noxious substance, thick and debilitating. One late afternoon before work, I walked up the mountain in search of lighter, more inhalable air. But as I looked down at the city beneath, flattened and greyed by the November fog, my shoulders and chest ached with the weight of the day.

I had to brace myself before shifts, the acrid smell of the kitchen, the dizziness of the crowded room, Louise's insatiable curiosity, her scrutinizing eyes. Yet, after a long night, when fatigue won over fitfulness and sleep came like a drowning wave, I would wake feeling

almost rested. Then, I'd take my coffee into the front room and look out my window onto the street.

Winter, as I suspected it would, had come early. A thick layer of snow covered the city. Neighbourhood kids, home for lunch, played road hockey in the opaque afternoon light. Occasionally, a car drove hesitantly by, disrupting the game, and left tracks and a slushing sound behind it. Outside my apartment, life went along persistently. But inside, things seemed curiously suspended and confined. The baby and I were holding each other hostage.

Tantalised by the possibility of complete erasure, of starting all over again, fresh, I had thought of ending the pregnancy. But each time the clatter in my head subsided, the apparition in the wall resurfaced. In those random moments of inner quiet, when I would allow myself to contemplate the child growing inside me, the sense of menace receded and I experienced a secret, almost forbidden joy. As long as I had only one tiny hand to my throat, I could manage.

But it was not just the two of us. Jean-Paul hovered around our circumference, trying to penetrate. Since learning of my pregnancy, he'd developed annoying habits, repeating things he'd just said, holding his shoulders too

far back. I was embarrassed by his swagger, his "I know all about this" pose. I began to find everything about his person unpleasant: his hair which was growing too long at the back and too thin on top, his bad French Canadian "no fluoride in the water" teeth, his large nose, his narrow arms. Despairingly, I'd make note of flaws that seemed genetically determined and not simply the result of poor diet.

For months I had been meaning to leave him. But each morning after he left for work the impulse faded. My bed looked far too big to sleep in alone. So instead I'd been riding out the remains of the affair, looking over his shoulder as we walked down St. Catherine, talking about keeping things open-ended. He'd hated that expression, found it duplicitous. In French "ouvert" suggested "open to possibilities," the opposite of what I intended. Now, like a tapeworm I'd ingested, he'd found a way, after all, of staying indefinitely with me.

In my mind, I railed at the invasive way babies were made, unrelated gene pools merging mysteriously into one, traits being passed on instantaneously and at random, without warning or consent. Soon most of our conversations took on the same high pitch, blame slung tirelessly back and forth till my recurring nausea brought the volume

down, and I'd collapse on the pull-out with my head between my legs.

One evening, the two of us having retreated to separate ends of the apartment, I tried to imagine a life with Jean-Paul. Perhaps it was simply a question of being civil with one another. Surely we could manage that. He was intelligent enough, gainfully employed. . . . We had once enjoyed being together. . . . If we put our minds to it, couldn't we somehow reposition ourselves in time, assume previous postures, recapture the original fascination--how difficult could emotional travel of that sort be?

I bolstered myself with these thoughts, felt assuaged by the conventional picture they brought to bear: father, mother, child. How neatly, quickly, tragedy had been averted by a simple flick of the right mental switch.

When Jean-Paul appeared in the kitchen doorway, I felt conciliatory, wanting to learn to care all over again.

"Still feel like going to my parents' for dinner?" he asked. His arms were crossed over his chest, thumbs tucked under.

I nodded. The nausea was seeping back into my pores. But at least I wouldn't have to cook.

We sat around the vinyl-top kitchen table while Jean-Paul's mother served low-sodium French onion soup. Of all his family, Jean-Paul resembled her most. They shared the same rounded chin, the same optimistic mouth. His smallish frame, though, he'd inherited from his father.

Monsieur Leclerc was sitting rather precariously at the end of the table as if propped up by cushions. His old maroon cardigan had unzipped to expose the greying rim of his undershirt and some drooping chest hairs. He smiled nervously in my direction, forehead skin crinkling over the bridge of his nose, and fidgeted with his fork and soup spoon.

The low-sodium was on his behalf. He'd been on long-term disability since the age of forty-eight, suffering from one ailment after another. His breathing was raspy, though he'd never smoked, and at mealtime there was always a row of multi-coloured pills by his water glass. Yet, despite his ailing health, he maintained such an eager expression that I kept fighting the impulse to hold his hand.

Jean-Paul hunched over his bowl and slurped his soup. "C'est tres bon, maman," he muttered. Clearly, our fight had had no ill effect on his appetite. His relish provided a marked contrast to my hesitant attempts at getting it down. The soup was so watery and tasteless.

Even the Parmesan, which floated on the surface, orange and humid, refused to give it any life. In an attempt to find my appetite, I conjured up visions of Sunday night dinners at home, before my father, Jake, died. Baked ham, roasted potatoes, green beans. Protein. Vitamin C. A bit of drool escaped my mouth and fell in my bowl. I took my spoon and finished the soup off quickly.

Giselle, Jean-Paul's aunt, tucked her napkin into her apron pocket and got up to clear the table.

"En veux-tu encore?" she asked reaching for my bowl.

"Non, merci. Mais, c'etait delicieux," I lied politely.

"Certaine? Sois pas genee."

She was stacking the plates busily and running water for the dishes. Over the table top, I eyed her scrawny bow legs and tried to remember what I had learnt in Biology classes about recessive genes. Popular wisdom had it that girls resembled their father's side of the family. I prayed silently for a boy.

The raspy drone of the electric kettle competed with the din of the television in the neighbouring room. Giselle returned to the table with a plate full of "barres magiques," the centrepiece of the meal. Madame Leclerc, who claimed to have been watching her weight diligently all week, tucked three or four squares onto her plate.

"Faut bien se gater de temps en temps."

I looked at the concoctions of graham crumbs, chocolate chips, and sweetened coconut, mentally evaluating their nutritional content.

"May I have a glass of milk to go with them?"

Four pairs of eyes exchanged knowing glances.

"Certainement," Madame Leclerc said, smiling.

In the living room, while Monsieur Leclerc buried himself in his La-Z-Boy with La Presse and Jean-Paul flicked channels on the TV, Madame Leclerc displayed her recent craft creations. Orange and brown tea cosies, lime-green acrylic tricot coat-hanger covers with matching slippers. Giselle placed her hand inside one of the slippers. Her own slippers hadn't turned out as successfully, and she examined her sister's crochet work over an outstretched, surveying hand.

Madame Leclerc turned to me. "I could make you a pair for Christmas?"

I smiled and mumbled a thank-you. Then I excused myself and went to the washroom. My head was buzzing, either from the sugar in the magic squares, the MSG in the soup, or a combination of both. I sat on the plastic toilet seat and stared at the ratty striped robe hanging from the back of the door. I could hear their muffled

voices, the hushed sounds of strained whispers, but I could only make out the odd phrase. "Qu'est-ce qu'elle a decide . . . ? Elle a l'air malade." I looked around the room for another way out. The bevelled glass window above the toilet was sealed shut.

As their conversation seemed to grow more intense, I slunk out of the bathroom and darted into Jean-Paul's old room. I lay down on the narrow bed and soon drifted off. Images emerged in the short lapses between wakefulness and sleep, almost daydreams but for their alarming contours. A woman with amputated arms. A long-haired man pinioned to the ground. I woke from each jarring vision to the persistent whispers beyond the door. Then, like a drugged animal, I retreated into the oblivion of sleep.

Chapter 3

With my back turned to the large smoked-glass window, I sat by the aisle and ripped tiny pieces of hangnail from my middle fingers. The train was stalled in the station, showing no sign of impending departure. So I immersed myself in the details of the carpet, tracing its faded pattern over and over in my head.

Finally came the promising whirr of ceiling fans. The lights flickered once or twice, and the engine vibrated beneath the seats. I didn't dare look up as we pulled out of the station for fear of seeing a man running along the platform. It was only when we had reached the huddled grey buildings of the city's outskirts that I looked out the window.

Everything was a gorgeous pulling away. Houses, entire neighborhoods, receded into unmenacing blurs and then, like airborne dust, disappeared altogether into the pink dawn. A bright morning sun broke the horizon as we sailed past the open fields of outlying farms. As the train crossed into Ontario, large wet patches of green

emerged like talismans from the surrounding yellow ice, smelling, I imagined, of warm earth and early spring.

At Union Station, my coat slung over my arm, I was absorbed in the flowing stream of commuters headed towards the subway. As soon as I touched the platform in Toronto, I had found my bearings. In Montreal, I could never seem to remember which bridge was the Jacques Cartier.

The swaying subway pulled me northward, and my hands clasped tightly around my still-flat belly. I had no idea how I would tell my mother Cynthia, nor what her reaction would be. I only knew that with each passing station, the tiny baby clung more tenaciously inside me. When we reached the pale blue tiles of Rosedale Station, I looked up. This was where we had lived when Jake was still alive.

My father died of a heart attack when I was thirteen. Though my older sister Samantha seemed to mourn him, my brother Teddy and I shared an image of his heart finally bursting open, valves popping and sputtering blood, his thickened arteries no longer able to contain such wrathful flow. Though we didn't really believe that he'd actually "passed on." His person had been far too large and looming to disappear into nothing. It was clear to us that Jake hadn't been cancelled by death, only fragmented. His presence could still be detected throughout the house:

at night, in the floorboards that yielded the sound of his emphatic step; or in the smell of authority, part shaving cream, part sealing-wax, emitted by the old study, where his ties--one hundred of them--still hung on the inside of his cupboard door.

Try as we might, Teddy and I couldn't really feel that we missed him. We'd discovered all too soon that he'd been carved out of something impermeable. The one we missed was Cynthia, the way she had been before, when Jake had been the harsh, angry parent, and she had cast the three of us under her spell. Who, as a small child, would not have chosen her over him, her long, soft fingers over his square fists, her fluid hazel eyes over his stern gaze? We had nestled around her redolent softness and whispered our secrets. And she, her long smooth neck cocked to the side, had smiled and listened.

After the funeral, she'd called us hard-hearted creatures. Our dry eyes she found a source of shame. Her mourning, so protracted and so unexpected by us, had a distorting effect. Soon, entire chunks of our childhood were being reimagined for us, smoothed out into benignly sunny vistas of familial calm. He had been such a generous provider, such a cohesive force. She never mentioned his violent rages which she herself had tried vainly to contain. From what we could tell, that Jake,

for her, had disappeared altogether, erased not by death but by willful forgetting.

Finally someone came along who didn't believe in our childhood ghosts and offered my mother more money for the house than she had ever considered possible. It was someone she half knew, who was marrying a woman with four children and needed a much larger home. It consoled Cynthia to think that the house was being traded into familiar hands.

With all her Rosedale furniture loaded up into a van, my mother moved to Moore Park the summer I was fifteen. The new house was really too small to contain all her belongings, but she wouldn't part with an item. For months, Persian carpets too large for the new living room lay rolled up against the hall door like slack oversized cigars. Velour divans and Louis XVI chairs and tables spilled out of the study. Dark landscape paintings, stacked like lawn chairs, leaned precariously against the dining-room baseboards. When Samantha went away to university that fall, Cynthia was able to transfer some of the clutter upstairs. Still, the modest house on a ravine-side crescent heaved under the weight of its possessions.

I cupped my hands and peeked through the semi-circle of glass above Cynthia's front door, then quietly let myself in. A two o'clock winter sun streamed through dust particles in the living room and bobbed in multi-coloured dots of light above the swirls in the carpet. I sat down on the divan and brushed some cigarette ashes off its velvety upholstery.

Above the mantle was an oil painting I hadn't noticed before, and I wondered when Cynthia had acquired it. Like so many in Cynthia's collection, it was painted almost exclusively in black and brown hues. Its subject was a small fishing boat about to be deluged from behind by a monstrous wave. Proportionately twenty or thirty feet high, the wave curled menacingly above the unsuspecting fisherman whose focus was on a swordfish rising in the distance.

The room was almost entirely dark when I woke, and at first I didn't notice Cynthia. Outside, it looked as though someone had drawn a blind on the sky, and only a thin wedge of yellow light emerged from beneath its grey panel. My mother was sitting in Jake's old wing chair, her back to the bay window, completely motionless. Her face was shaded, like a Harlequin's, and I squinted to make out her expression.

"Mum," I said, puncturing a hole in the stillness of the room. I reached out in the dark and placed my hand on her knee. Cynthia bent forward in her seat, her tired face emerging from the shadows, and took my hands in hers. We sat together for several moments in the silent dusk, Cynthia rubbing my fingers like rosary beads.

"When did you put up that painting?" I asked finally, freeing my hand from hers and pointing to the mantelpiece.

Cynthia reached into the cigarette box. "Have I met him?"

I shook my head.

She drew deeply on her cigarette. "Would I hate him?"

"I don't think so."

"Then, Andrea," she said, leaning forward and looking very close into my face, "marry him."

I pulled my knees up and pressed them hard against my chest. Though I wasn't showing yet, my breasts felt full and achy. "Can't I stay with you for a while?"

Cynthia stared off in the direction of the dining room. "Jake was always afraid this would happen."

"Mum."

"I myself always worried about Samantha." Cynthia cleared her throat. "Who would have known that she'd grow up to hate men?"

"Sam doesn't hate men, Mum. She just doesn't want to settle for second best. She's waiting for the right person."

"Right person." Cynthia snorted and extinguished her cigarette. "As if marriage had to do with meeting the right person."

Cynthia picked up the grocery bags that had flopped around her feet and headed into the kitchen. I trailed behind her, and as she quietly put tins away in the cupboard, I slipped into the banquette by the window and stared down onto the ravine. Dusk had wrapped itself around the gnarled tree branches like a purple fog. The partially frozen stream below was the colour of dead leaves.

"So can I stay?" I asked, not daring to look away from the window.

"Where else are you going to go."

Far off, in the distance, I could see the dim flicker of someone's Christmas lights. It's always amazed me how in mid-winter it can go from twilight to absolute darkness in seconds.

Chapter 4

Most mornings I woke to the vigorous pulse of Cynthia's shower beyond my bedroom wall. Then the thud of drawers opening and closing, and the screech of hangers pushed back and forth along the wardrobe bar. I listened to the receding step of her low-heeled pumps descend the oak staircase and click across the kitchen linoleum. Occasionally the smell of fried bacon rose in thick vapors to the second floor. But more often only the spicy scent of percolated coffee lingered in the air. That and the mist of French perfume that trailed in Cynthia's wake.

The real estate market had been stirring, and my mother, enticed by its movement, was out the door by eight. Though I was awake for the hour-long ritual that preceded her departure, I stayed in bed until I heard the emphatic closing of the front door and the sound of Cynthia's key engaging the deadbolt. Then I slipped into some sweats and went down into the empty kitchen.

I read all of the front section of the Globe and Mail in detail and the more sensational stories in Report on Business, those involving hostile take-overs and ousted CEO's. I glanced at the stocks page. I put away the

breakfast dishes and scrubbed the counter tiles free of coffee grinds and crumbs of toast. I decided what to make for dinner.

In the living room, I dusted the bookshelves and rearranged Cynthia's creased paperbacks. Originally I'd intended simply to order them under broad classifications: French Existentialists, Latin American Poets, Russian Novelists. But then I had to decide whether to arrange the books alphabetically within each category, or chronologically. Also, given that Cynthia's library was housed in a living room filled with art, might not jacket hues be taken into consideration, the pale covers on one shelf and the more sombre-coloured ones on another? Pink Marquez with mauve Sartre? Olive Dostoevsky with taupe de Beauvoir? In the end, this seemed the best.

I watered all the plants and trimmed their dead leaves.

I waited for the mail.

Then the pale evening light, and Cynthia's return.

The phone seldom rang in my mother's house. Cynthia had few female friends, and she had given up men entirely when Teddy and I were still in our teens. For a brief period after my father's death, my mother had dated. Then she began to see one man in particular. His name was John

MacPherson. He wore a full beard that partially concealed smooth, plump cheeks. His breath smelt of sweet pipe tobacco. He was tall, his hands were large, and we thought Cynthia might marry again.

One evening, a very thin woman appeared on our doorstep. She was wearing a trench-type raincoat with the belt pulled in tightly at the waist and a scarf around her head. She looked down at her shoes and asked to speak to my mother. She and Cynthia disappeared upstairs for over an hour. After that, my mother stopped going out Friday nights.

We ate dinner in the kitchen, by the window, overlooking the ravine. The green-carpeted dining room had long been abandoned. It had been at least two Christmases since the table sleeve in the corner had been used. At the base of the crystal centrepiece was a thick layer of dust.

After dinner, Cynthia took a glass of sherry and the paper upstairs where she watched the evening news in bed with the volume down low. I usually peeked in on her on my way up. Sometimes she had fallen asleep, her head propped by large pillows against the brass headboard, her sherry in one hand, the remote in the other. She slept at those times so soundly it was as if her personality were

flattened by sleep. I turned off the TV and placed her sherry glass on the night table, beside her reading glasses and real estate reports. Then I turned off the light and left her bedroom door ajar.

In my own room, a bright moon would sometimes shine through the open window. In its deceptive light, my desk furniture from high school looked like grazing cattle, my armchair like an old man huddled in the corner. Days would go by without Cynthia's mentioning the pregnancy, and if I avoided mirrors, I too would forget. Only at night under the sheets of my narrow bed as I traced the area between my breasts did I remember why I was back home. I slid my hand down over my abdomen, and against my perspiring palm I felt the baby's tentative kick.

One morning I pulled some Sartre and Camus off their colour-coded shelves and spent the rest of the day in Sam's old bedroom rereading L'Etranger and Huis Clos. Cynthia had moved in the old burgundy couch and Jake's writing desk when Sam left home and the room had become an upstairs study. Occasionally I stopped at a paragraph, reminded of someone. Underneath the musty smell of cracked leather was a fainter scent, something like Sam's. It had been over six years since she had last slept in

this room, but parts of her lingered, like fingerprints all over the walls.

When I finished Huis Clos, I cried. So much that my head and chest ached. I didn't admire any of the characters, but I thought Sartre was so cruel to leave them there in that closed room, forever.

It was almost dusk when I descended the icy bolted planks into the ravine. A fading sun, spread thin across the winter sky, shed small patches of yellow light on the shaded hills. On one slope, two twelve-year-old boys were dragging their sleds, shoving each other as they climbed. At the top they scissored over the green metal railing and disappeared down a lane. Then it was quiet and there was no one.

I followed their tracks up, carving the sides of my shoes into the slope, feeling them fill with wet snow and cold, damp mud. Occasionally, until I had gained the top, I grasped at protruding branches for balance. Teddy and I had raced up this hill countless times in high school. Sometimes I would sneak a head start and reach the top before him. But more often Teddy led and I would grab his shirt from behind.

It was at the top that Teddy and I used to exchange secrets, safely out of earshot and possible ridicule: my

ambition to become a theatre director, his most recent love interest and how he would ask her out. I coached him on intonation, idiom and timing. I demystified for him the hidden codes and body language of my sex. Our rehearsals produced the desired effect. I'd never known any girl to turn him down. One even had left school mid-semester. . . .

Now I was the one bent over, panting heavily, weak and dizzy. In the grey light, the bottom looked so much farther than I had remembered and I peered across the hill trying to find an easier way down. The slush had risen to above my ankles and my feet were numb with the wet cold. So, to gain warmth, I started running. When I was less than halfway down, I slipped on some ice and smashed to the ground. I slid backwards the rest of the way. Only as I lay winded and motionless at the bottom did the fear of falling shoot up from the base of my spine.

I stretched my arms against the ground, but at first I couldn't push myself up. I had bruised my hip, and my entire left side was numb. I rolled over to the right and freed my leg from under me. Then, in the slush and darkness, I sat and stared back up at the hill.

The middle of its face had been stripped of snow. Amidst the mud and pebbles, tiny blades of grass quivered in the evening breeze. To the right of them a sharp-edged

rock protruded from the earth like a lower jaw. I had narrowly missed it.

Slowly I got to my feet and brushed the crystalised snow from my back. Then, the blood restored to my legs, I hobbled back up the wooden stairs towards home. The street lights had been turned on, though Cynthia's house was still dark. I made it to my room before I heard my mother's step on the porch and her keys being dropped on the hall table.

"Andrea," she called up, "you home?"

But I didn't answer. I stayed in my room feigning sleep while Cynthia clattered pots below and brought her dinner upstairs on a tray. I heard her shoes clunk to the floor, the TV click on, and its volume being muted. When I sensed that Cynthia had dozed off, I got up to use the washroom. It was then that I felt two warm streams trickle down the insides of my legs.

I must have yelled out because when I looked up, Cynthia was standing in the doorway, her arms wrapped tightly around her plaid robe, her face tired.

"I hurt myself in the ravine." I raised a wet palm in the hall light to show her.

As Cynthia led me by the wrists to the washroom, I told her about the fall. She sat me on the toilet and

silently washed blood off my thighs and hands. Then she found me a sanitary pad and led me back to bed.

"I'm going to phone the doctor. If you need anything, call me. I don't want you getting up until the bleeding's stopped."

I kept my hand on my abdomen hoping to feel a gurgling stir but I felt nothing. I listened to Cynthia in her bedroom dial a number. A few minutes later the phone rang.

"Bright red," I heard her say through our closed doors. "Four months . . . maybe thirty feet. . . . We will. . . . Sorry to have disturbed you this late." She hung up the phone and turned off her light.

For a while it was completely quiet. But I couldn't sleep. The blackness of the room was creeping through my skin. I shivered underneath the weight of blankets Cynthia had given me. In the distance created by half-sleep, I heard sobbing, spilling out into the air in heavy bursts, despite her efforts to muffle and contain them.

Chapter 5

I spent the next day in bed. Cynthia stayed home from the office but kept mostly to herself downstairs. She brought me some soup at lunch and returned an hour later to take it back to the kitchen untouched.

Outside, the ashen light made it difficult to distinguish morning from late afternoon. I slipped in and out of sleep. Each time I woke, I worried for a moment that I'd slept through to the next morning or following evening. But then I would hear my mother making tea or doing the dishes and I realised that it was only a little bit later.

If I rolled by mistake onto my bruised side, I was reminded again of the fall. Details that had escaped me when it happened I relived in bed: the scrape of the rocks and pebbles against my spine, the mud and twigs in my hair and on my face, the initial force of my weight hitting the ground. Then I imagined different possible versions: rolling down sideways as in a barrel, or feet first on my front, my fingers dug deep into the slope. Or falling inches to the right and not missing the rock. . . . Which

part of me would have hit it first? My stomach? My back? My head? What kind of landing would result in a broken neck? And why was that almost invariably fatal? Could a skull crack open on impact and brain parts leak out? Could someone survive even that?

Later still I had to get up and I called down to Cynthia. She helped me out of bed and served as crutch as I made my way down the hall. My legs felt thin and weak, my step tentative, much like after a long illness. As I crouched down on the toilet, a dart of pain shot through my injured hip. But the bleeding had stopped. The blood on my pad was brown, the colour of rusted metal. It smelt old. I could hear Cynthia standing outside the bathroom door, waiting.

"I've made an appointment for you with Dr. Sanders for tomorrow," she said leaning over my bed.

I nodded. I'd seen him only once after arriving in Toronto and had been meaning to find another doctor.

His small dark office was in a low-rise sandwiched between two hospital towers. Sanders had delivered Teddy,

and the furniture and set-up of his office seemed to date back to then.

In the examining room, his thick fingers prodded me inside and out. I closed my eyes and thought of Cynthia trussing a Thanksgiving turkey. As he pushed down on my ovaries, I pushed my ankles together, ready to catch any body part that might be propelled out. Finally the poking ceased and with a snap of his latex glove Sanders declared, "Well, for better or worse, you haven't miscarried."

"I beg your pardon?" I was struggling to extract a foot from one of the stirrups.

"From the looks of it, you took quite a tumble." His eyes traced my leg from hip to ankle. I pulled myself up and pressed the paper gown over my thighs. Sanders shook his head as he dropped the gloves into the waste disposal. "But that baby's hung in there." He rubbed the corner of his mouth. "You should make an appointment for a month's time. Oh, and I'd avoid ravines for a while."

I left Sanders' office. Initially, I'd intended to go home, but at the last minute I changed my mind and hailed a cab south to the lake.

The Ward's Island ferry snorted in the docks. I bought a ticket and boarded, just as its foghorn sounded.

Despite the January wind, I stayed on deck. Beneath me, the lake frothed a translucent white as the boat ploughed its greeny-grey waters towards the thin strip of land in the distance.

She wouldn't be home from work for a couple of hours, but the Island Garden Cafe was open. I sat by the window and ordered a hot chocolate and a cinnamon bun. The waitress, dressed completely in black, was lean and muscular. Her dark hair, cut boyishly short, emphasized bright blue eyes and a smooth complexion. She smiled broadly as she brought me the food. She was no doubt my age, but her self-assuredness made me feel years younger.

The sun, emerging at last at the end of the day, bathed the harbour in a honey-coloured light. I looked out towards the city's skyline. The Royal Bank Tower wavered in pink and gold. Seagulls swooped and soared over the shimmering water. In the west, a white Cessna was landing at the island airport.

A couple sat, arms entwined, in front of me. They had ordered cappuccinos and the waitress stood at the espresso machine preparing them. Her lean arms pulled down on the press firmly. From behind, her body seemed so sturdy, so resolute. The kind that wouldn't trip on ice,

or bleed unexpectedly. A reliable, no-nonsense body, with stop signs all over it.

Most of the commuting island residents arrived on the six o'clock ferry. I waited in the cafe because of the cold but I knew I would be able to see her from the window. She would have to pass the restaurant on her way home.

I saw a woman in a black coat overtake a number of people on the path. Though her hair was cut differently than I remembered it--shorter, curlier, and with more grey in it--I recognized the straight shoulders and the quick, purposeful walk. I left the cafe and ran up behind her.

"Mrs. Freeman."

She turned around. Her coat was buttoned to the neck and her purple-gloved hand was grasping its collar. She wore long, geometric earrings that shone under the lamppost light.

"Andrea!" She was squinting in the light and shaded her eyes with her hand. "What a lovely surprise. What brings you to the island in winter?"

Mrs. Freeman's was the third cottage in on Lakeshore Avenue. She pushed the gate open and we followed the flagstones that intersected her tall-hedged garden. To

the left of the stone path, two wrought-iron chairs and a table made a corner. They were all painted a dark green to match the trim of the white house. On the second floor a large semi-circled window, also green, overlooked the vast expanse of water.

The inside was impeccable, the kitchen discreetly renovated, appliances upgraded, walls torn down, high-tech lighting installed. Mrs. Freeman hung up her coat--I kept mine on--and dropped her leather briefcase on the counter.

"So, what can I get you? Still drinking G and T's?"

"No. Thanks. I'm fine."

"Well, if you don't mind," she said, pouring herself a large glass of Dubonnet. "It's been a long week." She placed a plate of cheese and rice crackers on the mahogany coffee table and curled up with her drink in a wicker chair beside me.

"Is Mr. Freeman working late?"

"Friday nights he plays raquetball." She wiped some Dubonnet from her lips and leaned forward to pass me the cheese tray. Growing from the sides of her mouth were thin, dark hairs.

"So, tell me Andrea. I thought you were living in Montreal. Does Susan know you're back in town?"

I shook my head.

"Well, you should look her up. She's living on King Street, you know, with her boyfriend, Barry. I'm sure she'd love to see you. You two saw a lot of each other at McGill, didn't you?"

I nodded. "Mrs. Freeman?"

"Barbara."

"Yes. I need some advice." I rubbed my palms against my knees. "About adoption."

Mrs. Freeman leaned forward in her seat. "Are you asking me as an adoptive mother or as a lawyer?"

"Both, I think."

"Why don't you take off your coat, dear."

"I'm chilled." But I let it drop from my shoulders and it fell around my bulging waist.

"Oh, Andrea," she sighed, then reached for my hand. "You know that Susan is the best thing that happened to Mr. Freeman and me."

I nodded back my tears.

"And you know that there's a huge demand for babies. You'd have no trouble placing it." She pulled her chair close to mine and tucked my hair behind my ear. "I could even help you with that. Because of the scarcity of babies, more and more people are opting for private adoptions. Actually, I was speaking to a couple just this week."

She placed one hand on my shoulder. I looked up into her eager face.

"I just don't know. . . ."

"Of course not, dear. You don't need to explain anything. Anyone can see you're not ready for such a commitment. Why don't you stay for dinner. We can discuss this in further detail."

But my heart was racing and I felt a strangling need to be home. I knew there was a seven o'clock ferry, and if I ran I could make it. Mrs. Freeman kept her hand on my shoulder as she walked me to the door.

"We'll be in touch then, Andrea. Can I reach you at your mother's?" She was standing on the threshold calling out into the windy night.

"No," I stammered. "I'll call you. At the office?" I wiped my perspiring forehead with my glove.

"Fine," she yelled back. "I'll expect your call in the morning."

But I was already running down the path towards the dock. Its amber light flashed insistently in the dark. I didn't stop running until I was safely on board the ferry. As we approached Toronto harbour, the city appeared unusually bright, as if the skyline were lit up from behind. The wind had died. The boat entered the dock and the still black water lapped the shore a few times. Then,

once again, it was completely calm. At the top of the tower the tiny white signal lights flashed in alternating sequence. In their glimmering rhythm I detected a code that I was sure I could interpret if only I watched long enough.

Chapter 6

The phone rang much more frequently the next few days. Each time, I cranked the TV volume up and covered my ears until it stopped. In the living room I'd put the French Existentialists aside and concentrated on Cynthia's child-care books. Each morning I vowed to get one chapter completed but I couldn't read sequentially. I kept hopping from section to section, from baby at three months to baby at two years, from toilet training to midnight feedings, from pablum to lochia. I read and reread, trying to get a composite picture of my imminent future, but the words stayed firmly rooted on the page. I couldn't arrange their meaning in my mind in any coherent order. If they were transformed at all it was into a large amorphous jumble that weighed on the back of my brain.

One evening when Cynthia arrived home unusually early, the phone rang again, and before I had a chance to prevent her, she had answered it and handed me the receiver.

"Andrea, finally!" Barbara Freeman's voice boomed from the other end. "I've been trying to reach you for days! Listen, I've been in touch with that couple I

mentioned and they'd like to meet you. Any chance you could be at my office at ten next Thursday morning?"

Reluctantly I took the directions.

They looked nothing like the thin, white-knuckled couple I had conjured on the subway ride down. The woman, seated crossed-legged, her arm wrapped casually around her chair, was chatting and laughing with Barbara as I entered the office. She was youthfully dressed in a turtle neck and black leggings, but when she turned to face me I realized she was in her mid-forties. Her roots were a noticeably deeper auburn than the rest of her hair.

Her husband, who was wearing an open-collar shirt and plaid wool jacket, stood to press a warm, moist palm against my hand.

"Barry Cohen," he said, shaking my hand enthusiastically. "And this is my wife, Elaine Jacob." He extended an arm to include her without easing his grip. Elaine smiled, her lips whitening over her teeth.

Though he was probably his wife's age, he had the expression of someone ten years younger. His blond hair was streaked grey and there were pronounced wrinkles on his forehead. Yet there was something suspiciously boyish about his appearance, perhaps the way his hair was

parted too closely to the middle, or something almost conspiratorial about his smile.

Barbara got up from behind her desk to place a folding chair between Barry and Elaine. I squeezed past Barry and sank deeply into the canvas seat.

"So, Andrea," Barbara began, looking down at me. She was leaning against her desk. "Why don't you tell the Jacob-Cohens what you're looking for in an adoptive couple."

I rubbed my abdomen nervously. I hadn't prepared anything. I had imagined that I would be the one asking the questions.

"They should be kind," I half-whispered. The couple exchanged smiles from either side of me.

"Well," Barbara prompted, extending a perfunctory palm in my direction. "Are there things you might want a child to have? Music lessons, for example? Or a certain kind of education?"

"Years ago, I took piano lessons," I said. "I always wished I had gone further."

I felt the baby stir. In the last few days, its kicking had become especially vigorous, almost visible, and I splayed my hands across my stomach.

"You can rest assured," Barry began, "that Elaine and I have every intention of providing music lessons. Dance lessons as well, if it's a girl."

Elaine cleared her throat elaborately, and Barry quickly corrected himself. "Or if it's a boy, if dance were his interest, that is."

"As far as schools are concerned," Elaine jumped in, "we have our eye on a small, new independent school, the Mayberry Institute, which offers an enriched child-centered curriculum. You might have caught the write-up. It was profiled recently in Toronto Life?"

I looked up and nodded, feigning both knowledge of the article and interest in the topic. This hypothetical child, whose educational future we seemed to be discussing, had not the remotest connection to the primordial being floating restlessly inside me.

Barbara asked Barry and Elaine if they had any questions for me. Barry nervously twisted his wedding band around his finger with his thumb. Then he looked up as if surprised by his own curiosity. "How old are you?" he asked.

"Twenty-two."

He and Elaine exchanged another smile. "Why is that funny?" I asked. Leaning forward in her chair, Elaine looked past me at her husband.

"It's not humorous, really," she explained, brushing her hair back with her palm. "It's just that recently Bill and I were going over some of the literature we received from the fertility clinic. And in one or two pamphlets they cite twenty-two as the age of a woman's peak fertility. Clearly, your experience bears this out." She gave out a small, half-concealed chuckle.

"Quality ovum," I said under my breath.

That night I cleaned the crystal centrepiece, and my mother and I ate in the dining-room for the first time since I had arrived back home. After dinner, instead of her taking her sherry upstairs and my cleaning up, we lingered uncomfortably at the table. Cynthia kept biting her upper lip between long drags on her cigarette as if she were trying to chew off the tips of words before uttering them. I wanted her to say something, but I was afraid to disturb the silence that she and I, over the months, had sanded down to a glassy stillness. If I asked her what she was thinking, our tacit pact would surely break and splinter into a thousand pointed shards.

Instead I reached for my mother's hand and stroked its soft knotty surface. Her skin was even smoother than I remembered it as a child, but her hand was bonier now

and pale liver spots were emerging from some place beneath her skin.

"When I was pregnant with Teddy, I thought I had made a terrible, terrible mistake."

I had never heard my mother say this. It surprised me because it had always been obvious to Samantha and me that Teddy was her favourite.

"Your father had just opened the firm, and business was very slow. He hadn't been able to transfer a single one of his old clients. It was cruel, really. And you and Sam were so little and into everything. He would come home exhausted and furious and. . . ." She rubbed her left temple in a circle. "Well, I felt I had fallen into a dark abyss and there was no one to pull me out."

"What happened?"

"I don't remember, really. Nothing, maybe." She inhaled deeply on her cigarette and looked towards the living room. "You three got older. Things moved forward, in spite of me, and then one day I could somehow see over the edge of things."

Cynthia had never been good about keeping photo albums. She had begun one when Sam was born, continued it half-heartedly when I arrived, the time gaps growing larger between pages, sometimes photos separated by as

much as two years. By the time Teddy came, she had more or less resorted to emptied Birks boxes which had once held Christening and First Communion presents. All of these were stored in the large hall cupboard along with other miscellaneous testimonials of our childhood together: Teddy's first hockey stick, its black tape now a sticky charcoal grey; a First Grade Valentine--a large heart-shaped face on which I had crayoned improbably long eyelashes and a crescent-moon grin; a pair of girls' navy wool socks with holes in the ankles, no doubt put away to be darned; a suede purse lightly wrapped in turquoise tissue paper; four pine cones.

After Cynthia had gone to bed I brought the cracked brown leather album and the large pale blue gift box into the living room.

The photographs at the top of the pile were the most familiar. I had seen them before, even remembered posing for them, remembered the self-consciousness of the pose, smiling a practised, photograph smile. But those submerged beneath were minor revelations. Some dated back to Samantha's infancy, yet hadn't made it into the album. There was one of Jake cradling her in his arms, a pose so contrary to my memory of him that it defied recognition. He had taken off his glasses for the shot and was looking up mockingly into the camera. Baby Sam was eyeing his

fiercely handsome face, her head in a bonnet someone had knit for her, one bootied foot dangling out of the blanket.

This was one of the few pictures of Jake in the pile. There was a faded one of me on a swing, the blue of my dress merging with the brown sky behind me, my pink fists becoming one with the rusted chain handles they clutched.

Then many of the three of us, in a similar pose, taken six years in a row. In all of these, we were standing bone straight, squinting into the sun. This same pose, year after year, that recorded our discomfort with our incrementally growing bodies, our squinting eyes, our hunched shoulders, our forced smiles, these same ridiculous pictures, served as inserts for the seventy Christmas cards Cynthia sent out each year. I remembered the tiresomely long photo sessions, the flick of Jake's fingers under our chins to keep them up, his exasperated reprimands to stand up straight, smile into the camera, hold our heads up, arms to the side. And yet as I looked at the photos, now over ten years old, in all of them, despite or because of Jake's endless orchestrations and chastisements, Teddy was inevitably caught at some awkward angle, scratching an elbow, or with his head tilted to the side.

I had trouble sleeping that night. Behind my eyelids kept floating Teddy's crooked smile. Where was he now? He hadn't written to Cynthia since he left. I had received one card in Montreal from Kuala Lumpur but that was almost a year ago.

Was it daytime where Teddy roamed? What sweet exotic scents did he inhale in the streets of Eastern cities? Did he know, in the strange way that people know things, that I was pregnant?

Did he shuffle as laboriously in Singapore as he did down Yonge Street, dragging his large exploring feet across sandy streets of foreign towns?

I had brought the last picture taken of the three of us upstairs with me. Now I retrieved it from my desk and pressed it against my window pane. The cold wetness of the glass made it buckle in the middle, Teddy's crooked smile rippled by the effect, as he scratched his elbow in the dim moonlight.

I dreamt of the girl in overalls that night. This time, though, instead of a wall behind her there were red and yellow flames. They seemed so close to her and yet they didn't burn. She bounced on her heels obliviously as the fire raged behind her. Only the ends of her curls were illuminated by the blaze.

Chapter 7

Cynthia's words acted like rain on watercolour, edges losing their menacing sharpness, shades running into each other, the picture of the future becoming a soft-hued, penetrable region. If she could manage three children with Jake as a husband, surely I could handle one child on my own.

In late winter I found temporary stagehand work at a children's theatre. I had worked on a number of shows at McGill and missed the earnest smell of plywood, the rich lustre of stage paint. I didn't care that the position was temporary or that the pay was poor. What mattered was that most mornings I no longer waited for the mail but was out the door before Cynthia.

Three of us worked on the sets. My two co-workers, also in their early twenties, were recent College of Art graduates. Jennifer, the set director, was a thin woman with short bleached hair, shaved on the sides. She dressed every day in over-sized coveralls and work boots. Somewhere she had acquired a carpenter's habit of carrying

a spare nail in her mouth. It allowed her to say little. When she did speak, she breathed out each word in heavy syllables like someone perpetually winded. Peter was a lot more talkative, and at first this came as a relief. But later I got used to Jennifer's laconism, the uninterrupted sound of brush strokes, the concentrated, hopeful thud of the hammer.

The production was Rumplestiltskin. Jennifer, inspired by Van Gogh, had decided that the background trees would be painted in large mesmerising swirls. The forest was an ambiguous place, home to the menacing gnome but also where the secret of his name would be revealed.

The actor who played Rumplestiltskin was perfect for the part. Douglas had naturally troll-like features: a mottled, acne-scarred face with deep crevices where the make-up pooled and creased; a long broken nose; teeth a dark, tobacco-stained yellow; and curved shoulders which he hunched menacingly.

At the opening performance the young audience shrieked and pointed each time he came on stage. When he danced and cackled in the woods, rubbing his claw-like hands, long curling fingernails clicking together, grey dreadlocks slashing back and forth across his face, the children covered their faces and looked on between parted fingers.

Jennifer and I watched from the wings. Our swirling trees pulsated under the strobe lights and kept beat to Douglas's jerky, erratic movements. Jennifer's arms were crossed in front of her and she was leaning meditatively on one leg. But I could tell she was pleased by the effect. A slight smile formed on her face. "Psychedelic," she whispered.

Now Douglas was cackling and cradling the air, his arms outstretched over the orchestra pit. Some smaller children in the front row whimpered. A couple of toddlers began to cry, and their mothers carried them out of the theatre. The rest were thrilled into silence.

Cynthia came the following week, and afterwards she waited around so we could go home together. As we drove up Mount Pleasant she said, "You know, I never had much patience for the princess in that story. At least Rumplestiltskin holds up his end of the bargain."

"Mom, he's a troll. Trolls eat babies."

"I know, I know. All I mean is that he does teach her to weave straw into gold."

I had begun pre-natal classes. We sat in a semi-circle on the floor supported by husbands or in my case large pillows, the women comparing the size of their

stomachs, the men massaging their wives' shoulders and looking involved.

The nurse who led the class spent the first two meetings discussing nutrition and exercise. I looked around the room. It really seemed too late to be discussing this for some of the women. Even their earlobes were bloated. I stared at their pudgy fingers squeezed like small sausages into engagement rings and wedding bands. I tried to imagine them unpregnant. Mentally I took away blocks of fat to discover the beings lost behind walls of surplus flesh. But I could never get a clear picture of them not pregnant. Pregnancy hadn't altered me the way it had altered them. It was obvious now that I was pregnant, but the rest of my body had stayed slim, more kangaroo than water buffalo.

By the third meeting the topic veered from pregnancy to childbirth. We spent most of the class on breathing and pushing. I propped myself against the cushion the nurse handed me while the other mothers-to-be leaned back into their husbands' coaching arms.

One couple in particular, Marcia and Wayne, seemed especially in love. We spoke regularly at the break. Wayne always looked more excited about the pregnancy than she. He kept stroking her hair and giving her hand tight little squeezes. He was a bit shorter than his wife, and

wore a thick moustache. His laugh was large and nervous, filled with the fear of offending.

"You've decided against a coach, then?" Marcia asked after our third class together.

"Flying solo, I'm afraid."

"You'll manage just fine," said Wayne. He smiled and wrapped his arm tightly around his wife's shoulder.

She was twice his size now. Her tent-like yellow maternity dress exposed bloated white calves and gnarled blue veins. But Wayne didn't seem to notice. It didn't seem to matter to him.

The sun was setting behind them. The pink-gold spring light irradiated the ends of her curly blonde hair and danced in the grooves of her diamond ring. They formed such a happy image that I wanted to squeeze into it, form some bizarre trio with its back warmed in the sun, frozen in time.

By the next week the tone of the class changed for the worse. The nurse now seemed unbearably dour. I could no longer stand looking at her pale face and dry lips. I doubt she was married or had had any children herself. But she displayed a morbid fascination with everything that could go wrong in a delivery. She spent a full class on breach births, caesarian sections, and the risk of partial paralysis associated with epidurals. After that I

cut the last two classes and figured my body would know what to do when the time came.

It had become more and more difficult to sleep as the final weeks approached, my body never comfortable in any position for long. In the middle of the night I was suddenly awake and yearning to be touched, to be in the company of someone. Everything about my pregnant body begged interaction. My enlarged breasts now yielded foremilk, my abdomen, stretched to capacity, craved a hand other than my own to trace its rising arc.

It seemed crazy to feel so much want, so much absence, when my body was so full. As sleep receded too far for me to grasp it, I conjured up men from my past to slip momentarily beside me. I imagined them in such precise detail that I could almost feel their bodies pressing against mine--Matthew's lean hairless torso, his runner's legs and long nimble fingers; Bruce, swarthy and hirsute. I could taste the beer on his smooth full lips. But then as his phantom breath approached my mouth, his image was suddenly punctured by a sharper, more insistent ghost rising from behind my thoughts. Only Jean-Paul's spectre would remain hovering over my bed, heavy and imposing, with none of the shadowy allure of the others.

I would get up to use the toilet. Then when I returned to my room, I would sweep the air vigorously with my arms, brush away all phantom molecules so that sleep alone could return.

Chapter 8

Then the heat came. The days curled around the edges in the sweltering humidity, and my body like overripe fruit sagged with water. Cynthia had never bothered adding a deck or balcony to the house. There was only a cobblestone path that overlooked the ravine and I hesitated to sit out there alone. So I spent the days inside with the curtains drawn to keep out the sun and heat.

Even if I kept perfectly still, the activity of my pregnant body made me perspire profusely. The baby kicked spasmodically and my stomach, retreating high in my ribcage, left a perpetually sour taste in my mouth. My feet were so swollen that I could no longer fit into my sandals. I rested with my legs up on the couch like a moored ship.

In a corner of the living room were multicoloured boxes of baby furniture and accessories. In the heat I had been incapable of sorting through any of them and setting up the nursery, and so the boxes remained.

Besides, the baby was late. I had already gone over a week past my due date and I had given up on the idea of delivery. It happened to other women but not to me. I would carry this child for another nine months and then eventually someone would have to come along and pry it out. Though the baby's head had dropped and was firmly lodged against my pubic bone, the whole area had gone to sleep and there was no way of jogging it awake.

When I could stand my couch moorings no longer, I padded around the dim silent house, occasionally peeking out into the buzzing early summer heat. In the distance I could hear cars honking and accelerating on Mount Pleasant Avenue, the vigorous chirping of robins, and the hissing sound of neighbourhood sprinklers. The ravine was so green and the hill very different from the ice-covered incline of winter, less steep somehow, now that it lay under a thick carpet of grass. From the kitchen I heard the doorbell ring. I walked slowly because of false labour contractions, and twice a muscle spasm in my upper thigh made me stop and clutch the staircase handrail.

A young delivery man stood at the door with a package. He held it out to me and smiled. Then he took off his blue hat to wipe sweat from his forehead. It was then that I recognized one of Teddy's friends from high school.

"Andrew," I said, "How have you been?"

"Hi, Andrea." He was now looking down at the green carpet and fiddling with the metal clamp on his clipboard.

"It's O.K. to look," I said.

The smile returned to his face. "Teddy didn't mention anything."

"You're in touch with Teddy?" I took his hand and pulled him inside. "Tell me everything. I'll give you something to drink."

Andrew followed my bulging figure into the kitchen. I tried my best not to waddle, to tuck everything in, to look as unpregnant as I could. But I knew I looked like a baby elephant in a sun dress.

I poured Andrew a large glass of lemonade then hoisted myself up on the counter. Through the window the ravine was brimming with spring life. It was as if more flowers had bloomed since I'd gone to answer the door. Like those biology movies in the tenth grade, nature was sprouting in accelerated motion. The scent of pollen, freshly cut grass, and new buds intermingled and wafted through the kitchen. I inhaled deeply. "Tell me about Teddy."

Andrew drained his drink and placed his glass on the counter beside me. "I got a card a week ago from Delhi. He's met someone."

Good old Teddy. Never without a woman. Thinking of him now made me unbearably lonely. "Do you want to feel the baby?"

Andrew giggled. "Sure." He pushed his glasses back against his face and wiped his hands against the front of his pants. I took his right hand and placed it against my stomach. The baby gave a forceful kick just below my breast.

"Wow, I've never felt anything like that before." Andrew was grinning. He had perfectly straight white teeth. His build was broad like Teddy's, and they shared a similar kid-like sense of humour. It was easy to see why they were friends. I glided Andrew's hand further down around my navel where he felt the fluttering movement of a hand.

"Teddy's beautiful older sister. The one the niners fantasized about."

"Not much fantasy material left here."

"You're still beautiful." Andrew's hand had slipped down to my thigh.

"I miss Teddy so much," I said.

"Me too."

I brushed his hair from his eyes. Sweat glistened on his forehead.

"Is it always this hot in June," I said.

Andrew removed his hand from my thigh. "I dunno. I guess." He tucked a loose strand of hair behind his ear and started to talk about Teddy.

Instead of listening, I imagined making love to Andrew, perched and protruding as I was. I imagined him kissing me, and I was drawing his entire mouth into mine. Arrows of false labour pain and desire were shooting down between my thighs, merging and intersecting, cancelling each other out. Then, resurfacing, spreading, invading my whole body. I imagined Andrew pressed inside me, and my underpants were soaked at the thought of it. I could almost feel wetness dripping down the inside of my leg.

Andrew had stopped talking and was staring down at the floor where a puddle had formed on the tiles beneath my feet. More arrows were shooting down my legs, but these were no longer one-way vectors. The pain had taken on a wave-like motion. I closed my eyes as it flushed from my chest down to my ankles in one violent thrust.

When I opened my eyes, I saw panic creased on Andrew's face. His hand was stroking my arm, but I hadn't been conscious of it. I knew I had to move, to do something, but the imminence of the next contraction sealed me to the counter.

Andrew was pulling my hand, but I pushed him back. The tidal wave was building momentum again and crashing

with all its pent-up force around my pelvis. I was breathing out with the crest of the wave, trying to mimic its rhythm with my breath. By the third round, I'd gotten to riding the wave and pushing its flow through me.

Then its shape changed. It had become some wild forest creature, a boar, snorting deeply, its tusks piercing into the earth, excavating and upheaving. My breathing became as heavy as its. I was pushing the creature down into the dirt, accompanying him in his frantic excavation. So much so that I was becoming that wild snorting creature, burrowing through my own insides.

I heard Andrew's panicky voice over the boar's insistent rustlings and for a moment I was distracted from them. The boar burrowed unassisted and locked his tusks into my thighs.

"Whoah," I moaned. Andrew was running water and splashing it on my neck and forehead. I opened my eyes and let Andrew ease me down off the counter.

"The baby's coming," I said. My arm wrapped around his shoulder, I hobbled out of the house and into his postal van. Andrew strapped me in, then hopped into the driver's seat.

"Women's College Hospital. Off Bay. On Gr--" Another contraction was coming on. I sealed my eyes shut through the boar's repeated excavations. Peeved at not finding

what he'd come out of the woods to hunt, he was taking it out on my cervix, pummelling it open.

"Calm, calm," I chanted. To placate the beast, I imagined my body opening up as hospitably as possible.

Andrew was squeezing his van in and out of lanes of traffic, narrowly avoiding the parked cars that lined Wellesley Street on Friday afternoon. When we reached Bay, Andrew became wildly impatient with the traffic. He was honking his horn and pumping his headlights on and off.

Instead of turning left on Bay, he proceeded through the intersection. "I'll go 'round Queen's Park and get onto to Grovesnor from there." In reply I gave the hand grip above me an extra pull.

Andrew swung around the park then drove south to Queen's Park Circle. But when he approached the front of the Parliament Buildings the road was closed. Through half-open eyes I saw old men in little red hats driving what looked like miniature automobiles. The contractions were making me hallucinate.

"It's the bloody Shriners' parade!" Andrew exclaimed. The old men were progressing around the circle and down University Avenue like an army of ants. There was nothing to do but wait until they had all filed by. Andrew

gripped the steering wheel until his knuckles turned white. "Pez heads!" he screamed.

The boar was loose. He was scrambling all over the van and charging across the dashboard, impossible to control.

"Stop the van, I have to get out." I had unfastened my seatbelt.

"Please, Andrea, don't! I'll get you there!"

But the Shriners were showing no signs of thinning out. Andrew spun the steering wheel to the left and pulled up onto the curb of Queen's Park. Then he drove the Canada postal van straight across the lawn of the Parliament buildings to the other side of the circle. Lined up along University Avenue were policemen yelling into their walkies and gesticulating excitedly. But Andrew kept driving. He swerved onto Grovesnor and pulled the truck up to the curb. We were hobbling through the sliding doors when all of a sudden I became curiously serene. The beast had disappeared, retreated unindulged deep into the woods.

"She's giving birth!" Andrew was yelling over the top of my head to the hospital receptionist. His alarm seemed wholly out of place.

"Last name."

"There's no time for that! Please, get her upstairs."

"I need some patient information to admit her."

"Can't you hear me?" Andrew shouted in a voice that didn't sound like his. "She's about to have the baby here on the floor!"

Out of nowhere appeared a wooden wheelchair, a relic of the First World War, pushed by a cheerful young orderly. We were in the elevator going up.

The chair was reassuringly sturdy, great for bearing down. When the beast re-emerged, I could trap him against the wooden slats, squeeze him to a halt between my butt and the seat of the chair.

Andrew was alarmed by my semi-satisfied grunts. "Hold off, hold off! Wait till we find the doctor!"

The elevator doors opened and Andrew wheeled me out and past the nurses' station. A tall nurse with streaked blond hair and bright pink eye shadow had grabbed her clipboard and was scurrying behind us down the long corridor.

I was in the delivery room, and Andrew and the nurse were hoisting me onto the table. She was yanking at my underwear. Her hands felt cold and scrubbed.

Andrew was stroking my arm, but I shook his hand off. Being touched made the process more fierce. I could feel the baby's head pushing against my dilated cervix, pushing to get out. But now I was resisting. How could I

help such a large object to pass through me? There was no room. No desire. Better to keep it inside, safe, hidden. Out of reach of those bright lights, those cold, dispassionate hands.

"Where's the doctor?" Andrew was demanding. "He should be here by now!"

"We've paged her," the nurse replied calmly.

The pressure was easing slightly. The baby's head felt less like a clenched fist against my groin and more like a large firm fruit with forgiving contours. Now I needed to push without hurting it. But how could I without damaging its shape?

"You musn't tense up like that," the nurse scolded. "It only makes it worse."

"Where's the damn doctor!" Andrew's complaint I absorbed like a mantra: push--where's the damn doctor--push--where's the damn doctor. Then I lost the rhythm and felt like a child on a bicycle whose feet have slipped off the pedals and is gliding dangerously towards the parked cars.

"When you feel the contraction coming, bear down." But I'd lost the momentum. I was pulling instead of pushing, defeating my own body.

"Just get this thing out of me!"

"Please push, Andrea, as hard as you can," Andrew was whispering. I could feel his warm breath in my ear, his clammy palm, which I gripped tightly.

The wave rose up. I was grunting and bearing down, my feet jammed against the stirrups, squeezing the baby out through my eyes.

"Yes, yes. I see the head." Suddenly enthusiastic, the nurse was rooting me on. The kind that backs only winners. So be it. I heard the snap of rubber gloves and their powdery touch on my knees. The wave rose up. I was pushing, and the back of the head emerged, wet, black, anonymous. Once more. Shoulders. The nurse had the baby by the waist. Again. It slipped out, easily, fluidly, like a seal on ice.

"It's a girl, and she's absolutely fine," the nurse said, reading my thoughts. She wrapped the baby in a towel and was wiping stuff off her face. I looked up into the large concave mirror and caught a glimpse of her. She had enormous violet-blue eyes that took up most of her tiny V-shaped face. They scanned the room as if sizing it up, the place where she had newly landed.

She had come from very far indeed. Another moon. Another star.

We were silent.

"How pretty," I said finally. I had to dredge the words up, like broken pieces of glass beneath mounds of silt. I knew the words weren't right, as did Andrew and Janet--in the euphoria of birth we'd become cordial and introduced ourselves--though they nodded silently in agreement. Not pretty but majestic. She'd reigned elsewhere.

Janet passed her to me, where she lay calmly in my arms, trusting a stranger. Her eyes were closed now. Already she was losing the primordial regalness. She could have been anyone's baby nestled in the crook of my arm.

I was freezing and started to shake uncontrollably. Janet took the baby back. Andrew had pulled up a chair beside me and was alternatingly wiping my brow and his.

"Have you ever held a baby, Andrew?"

"Gee, not since my sister was born."

I sighed and looked away in the direction of the untouched birthing equipment laid out neatly on a white table cloth. The doctor had finally arrived. Because the baby looked jaundiced, Janet was to take her up to neo-natal. Another nurse came in to wash me. She wheeled me into an empty labour room, then went in search of a free hospital bed. Andrew followed her down the hall. He had to go move the van, which he had left parked at the

hospital entrance. He said he would meet me back in my room.

I listened to the receding squeak of his running shoes then to the din of the maternity ward, the paging of doctors, and the sound of glass bottles pushed along on wobbly carts. In the darkened room, slack green baize curtains separated the bed from the toilet. There was no other furniture. If there'd been a phone in the room, I might have made a phone call. But there wasn't. So I just sat in the semi-darkness and waited for someone to come back.

Chapter 9

I think at least an hour went by before anyone returned. The only bed available was in a semi-private room down at the very end of the hall. There was a woman in the other bed when I arrived. I assumed she was asleep because her curtain was drawn and the only sound I heard behind it was slow muffled breathing. Was it nighttime already?

Andrew reappeared looking rushed and nervous only to say that miraculously he hadn't been towed and that he would check in on the two of us in the morning. Then an orderly brought in my dinner tray and left one on the sill for the patient beside me. After dinner, I phoned Cynthia at work but the receptionist said she was showing houses till eight. Was there a message? I thought of calling Jean-Paul but fought the impulse to do so. I kept waiting for someone to walk in with flowers. But who knew? Nobody. Cynthia had phoned Samantha in Vancouver when I was six months along. They had talked mostly about the accident. Halfway through their conversation, Cynthia had

called me to pick up the extension. Sam had asked, "So you're all right?"

"Uh huh."

"But you could have lost the baby falling like that."

"I know."

"I mean you really could have lost it." She kept repeating that idea over and over till I was no longer sure whether she was happy or disappointed that I hadn't.

And Teddy. What was the point in even hoping any more to get news from him? Postcards from Malaysia with no return address. Last week Delhi and now probably somewhere else altogether. Averie and Isaiah--but we hadn't been in touch since I left Montreal. There was Marcia from pre-natal classes. Our due dates were similar, and we were giving birth at the same hospital. She might even be in the ward now. But perhaps it was better this way, not to tell anyone, and keep it secret for a while.

I heard rustling in the next bed, the screech of a curtain yanked on its track, then the slap of two bare feet hitting the floor. When she walked around the foot of her bed, I caught sight of my neighbour. She had shoulder-length reddish hair cut in a shag, a lot of freckles on her face, and the same post-natal figure as

me, slim but for a large sagging middle. At first glance she looked even younger than I.

"So, what'd you have?" she asked, taking a sideward glance at my chart.

I told her.

She'd had a boy. She waddled to the bathroom then yelled through the door she'd left ajar, "My name's Stacey."

"Glad to meet you," I yelled back.

Stacey was still in the washroom when a nursery attendant wheeled in two babies on carts. At first I had trouble distinguishing which scrunched up face was the one I had pushed through my hips into the world. But after the attendant parked the blue-blanketed baby by Stacey's bed, I was once again confronted by the little swaddled stranger lying on its side and howling reproachfully.

"The babies are here," I yelled at the washroom door.

"I'll be out in a sec."

I picked mine up hesitantly, like a stolen object. She screamed even more fiercely, her body becoming stiff and rigid, her cheeks blue from the effort of crying. I was scared I would drop her, so I quickly placed her back down in her plastic bassinette. I had disheveled her like a bird taken out of its nest, and I could only look on helplessly as she wailed.

Her crying acquired a higher, inconsolable pitch. I looked down at her bundled contorting body and thought she would die if something weren't done quickly. Stacey emerged from the washroom and caught me staring helplessly into the crib.

"Just pick her up, for Chrissakes." But I sat frozen with fear. Though her own son was now crying as well, she reached for the little girl. "Get under the covers and I'll pass her to you." Then she scooped up her own child and, holding a baby in each arm, rocked soothingly back and forth on her heels.

"She's just hungry," Stacey said over the babies' competing wails. Her tone of voice was approaching something like compassion. "As soon as you nurse her, she'll calm right down."

"But I don't know what to do."

Stacey raised her eyebrows and assumed her previous disdainful pose. "Geez, you didn't exactly prepare for motherhood, did ya."

I loosened my smock, and Stacey placed the baby in my arms. With eyes closed tightly and mouth opened wide, she rooted around for my breast. I pressed her closer to me and she latched on with an exasperated tug. She sucked vigorously, as if she had always done so, and the room, but for her little slurping noises, was silent. Only

seconds ago this baby seemed on the verge of choking from grief. Now, apparently contented, she was oblivious to the urgency of discomfort only seconds old.

Her lids, no longer creased in angry folds, were smooth and they fluttered slightly as she sucked. I couldn't feel anything like milk coming out of my breast. But how could someone suck so happily on air?

She was so small in my arms, seven pounds at birth, and yet her body weighed heavily against my chest. I wanted to stroke her soft, tiny cheek that collapsed slightly inward with the effort of nursing, inhale the delicious smell of her pale forehead. But I stopped just short of doing so, as if some strong, unknown hand had seized my wrists and the back of my neck and pinned them down.

"When does she know when to stop?" I called out to the next bed.

"Give her about ten minutes on each side to start."

"Stacey, I don't have a watch."

"God, you're hopeless. Switch now if ya want and I'll time ya." Then a pause anticipating my next question. "Stick a finger in the corner of her mouth to break the suction." The baby whimpered but didn't cry. Settled on my left side, she resumed her peaceful feeding until to my utmost relief she fell asleep. My fumbling

first attempt at breast-feeding had resulted in a minor miracle.

I placed my sleeping prize back in her crib and, since it wasn't far down the hall, wheeled her back to the nursery. My legs weren't steady, as though my centre of gravity had been shifted by the birth, and I leaned on the bassinette for balance and support.

A large nurse was rocking two infants in a chair, but otherwise the nursery was empty. No doubt the other babies were still being fed. When I returned to the room, I noticed the baby's cart still parked beside Stacey's bed.

"I thought you said only ten minutes a side."

"He's rooming in." He was asleep in her arms, his breathing, steady and calm, lulling us both into whispers. "You mean overnight, too?"

"Don't worry. I'll get him before he wakes you." Stacey lay down with him and drew her curtain. I got into bed and did the same.

I looked up at the ceiling and thought of the baby who had nursed with such blind determination and insistence. There was something so unfamiliar about her quivering chin that jutted out of her perfect little face like a pronounced V. She didn't look a thing like me. Not one feature of mine had she inherited. I had pushed forth a stranger, someone whom the nurses, Andrew, and now

Stacey were calling my daughter, my child. But that was preposterous. I had no idea who she was.

Evidence of the birth had grafted itself on me like insinuating scars. My stomach was flatter but to the touch like jelly. Blood stuck to my thighs like dry, aging paint. Childbirth, it seemed to me, was like a rabbit's hole that you entered at one end and came out another. And in the course of all that burrowing you were reshaped, your image recognizable but the proportions, like in a distorting mirror, all out of whack.

Chapter 10

Throughout the weekend, I stayed in the hospital where a ritual of feedings and diaper changes quickly established itself. Under Stacey's watchful eyes I was starting to get the hang of this thing called motherhood and discovered by Saturday evening that there really wasn't all that much to looking after a baby.

I had visitors. Andrew came back the next day as promised, with a bouquet of pink carnations and baby's breath. Cynthia, whose pager I'd finally managed to reach later that first evening, arrived as Andrew was leaving and stayed well past visiting hours. She sat in the easy chair in the corner of the room and held the baby when they brought her in for her evening feeding. Cynthia took to her immediately as if she had known her always. It had been years since I had seen my mother so freely affectionate. When she cradled the baby, there was no large hand seizing her wrists or pinning her back. An invisible string connected the two, along which passed the secrets of family.

After Cynthia left, I sent the baby back to the nursery. I didn't know how Stacey did it--rooming in--when visibly childbirth had taken as much a toll on her as it had on me. How could she look after someone else around the clock when she herself was in so much need of repair?

I for one needed sleep, uninterrupted sleep, sleep that covered consciousness like a thick blanket, impervious even to the whispering and shuffling night nurses who took blood pressure and dispensed painkillers in the dark.

I was always happy to see the baby so expertly swaddled and well cared for. I marvelled at her little fist that wrapped itself around my baby finger like a small white band, the little bit of skin that hung from her top lip, her tiny red feet that kicked free of the blanket each time she nursed. But then I was tired, and relieved that the nursery was near.

Stacey didn't need the support of the nurses and scared away those foolish enough to offer her advice. "How many children ya got?" she taunted the morning nurse who had tried to show her another way of holding her son when he nursed.

"Oh, I never been married, darling."

"Neither was I. But this kid's my third. There ain't nothing about babies I haven't already learnt first hand."

Stacey was so forceful that at least two morning nurses we never saw again. I hated the sense that ours was a room staff avoided, and yet I couldn't help feeling that I was being protected from something in the process.

On Sunday night when it seemed as though the entire ward had quieted down, Stacey passed me a slip of paper between the dangling curtain that separated our beds. "You'll need my number," she said.

Cynthia arrived in the morning. She'd spent the weekend unpacking the boxes and setting up the nursery in the upstairs study. When she walked into the room, she was carrying the car seat I'd never unpacked, and had a diaper bag slung over her left shoulder. She pulled out a pink and white striped sleeper and a disposable diaper. "We'll need to get her out of her hospital nightie."

I hadn't thought of any such details. I hadn't even thought of diapers. Cynthia reached into the bassinette for the baby I had just nursed to sleep and held her against her shoulder.

"Mum, you'll wake her."

"We have to go, Andrea. Besides, the car ride will lull her back to sleep. There's something for you in the bag."

I looked in and pulled out a large, white, industrial-strength nursing bra. My breasts were so painfully swollen with milk that I couldn't see fitting them into anything, even something that size.

"If you go on nursing you'll need to wear it."

I put it back into the bag and went into the washroom to change. In the dark hospital mirror I examined my face. The tiny blood vessels that had broken in the strain of labour were beginning to fade. No longer spidery red, they were pink and starting to blend with the pigment of my skin. Still, my face looked different, flattened and pale, my eyes glazed with fatigue.

My breasts were heavy and red with engorgement, veiny blue on the sides where the skin, as on my stomach, had been stretched into shiny puckers. I had never looked so horrible in my life.

I had only the maternity dress that I had worn into the hospital. I pulled it over my head like a shroud. It was only slightly looser around the middle, improbably tighter around my hips.

Cynthia had changed the baby and strapped her into the car seat by the time I came out. She looked at me and

said, "You sure you don't want to wear the bra? You'll feel more comfortable."

"Nothing will make me feel more comfortable. Let's just go."

We passed the nursery for the last time and took the elevator down. The baby and I waited on the main floor while Cynthia brought the car around. It was a bright sunny day and each time the glass doors opened, a thick stream of heat and jarring traffic noises swept into the building.

I sat in the back with the baby as Cynthia navigated the streets of the outside world. The shiny metal cars gave off sparks of light. The day was too bright for comfort. I could only focus on the sharp edges of buildings, the haste of the drivers in the opposite lane. I kept insisting that Cynthia slow down, though she tried to assure me that she was driving below the limit.

The house was as dark as a cave. Cynthia had drawn all the curtains in an attempt to keep the house cool. We walked in semi-darkness upstairs.

The study was completely transformed. Cynthia had pushed the old leather couch into the hall and in its place was a white cradle with a long lace skirt. In the corner was a brown change table.

"I thought we'd specified white. I was going to send it back but..."

"Mum, as long as there's a place to change her."

I put the baby down in the cradle, then Cynthia and I went downstairs for a cigarette. I smoked three in a row and would have lit a fourth had the baby not cried. The two of us rushed back upstairs. She was completely drenched as if she might be melting from the heat. I changed her diaper and her bedclothes then nursed her on the hall couch. But she cried when I changed sides and refused to take the other breast. Cynthia was downstairs preparing bottles as the crying baby and I paced the upstairs hall. Things had gone so smoothly in the hospital. There had been none of this balking. Her body was curled backwards as if repelled by me, and her screams echoed throughout the house. I heard Cynthia's footsteps on the stairs and the clang of bottles on a tray. She took the baby from my arms and offered her a bottle of water, from which she drank several ounces.

"In the heat," Cynthia said, "they're always so unpredictable. Teddy was a summer baby." When Cynthia handed the baby back to me, she was drowsy and sucked only briefly before she fell back to sleep.

While Cynthia cooked dinner, I sat in the kitchen and smoked. I lost count of how many. Cynthia put a plate in front of me. The stir-fried chicken had been arranged attractively around a small mound of rice. The multicoloured vegetables shone like three-dimensional art, exquisitely beautiful and not the least bit appetizing. I watched my dinner get cold on the plate then pushed it discreetly aside and lit another cigarette.

Cynthia brushed the air with her hand. "You're not going to eat anything?"

I sucked deeply on the filter. Cynthia took my plate and scraped the contents onto her own. I got up to get a beer from the fridge.

"A name, Andrea, might help." Cynthia retrieved the baby book from the living room. She wasn't an Amanda or an Allison. Averie and I had only been joking about Artemis. We were halfway through the U's when the baby cried.

"Ursula, little bear," I exclaimed.

"Ursula," Cynthia scoffed, going upstairs.

But by evening's end, that's what we were both calling her. She did look like a little bear with her dark skin and hair, the way she cradled the water bottle or pawed my chest as she nursed. With a name like that, she would certainly know how to fend for herself.

Cynthia went to bed after the eleven o'clock feeding. I tried to sleep but was kept nervously awake by the controlled steady breathing from beyond the study door. Ursula's breath expanded to fill up the corners of her room with its sound. How could one small baby's breathing be so loud and take up so much space?

I went down to the kitchen to get another beer then stretched out on the living room couch with a smoke. As long as I could keep a cigarette burning at all times I was fine. The tiny red end of it acted as a perpetually engaged panic button. Smoking kept me on a steady plane, allowing me to concentrate on my own breathing and block out the more formidable breathing upstairs.

But after a while, I could hear Ursula even from downstairs. I sucked on the beer, lit another cigarette, but the panic kept rising inside me. I could feel the baby's breathing pushing down on my skin and forcing the anxiety out through my pores.

What was the source of such fear? There had been nothing to it in the hospital, just a fairly straightforward routine. Hundreds, thousands, millions of women had done this before me.

I finished my beer and lay on my side. But just as I was beginning to feel the calm of sleep approach, Ursula's

yell cut through the house. I raced upstairs to quieten her by myself for the first time since she had been born.

PART TWO

Chapter 11

The fog descends and wraps itself around my head, wrists, and chest. So tightly that I have no breath to tell Cynthia. So tightly that it stretches and flattens my brain like a rubber band, the thick flat kind that grocers use to bind stemmed vegetables, like asparagus or broccoli.

I'm losing my intelligence. No doubt it occurs at night, leaks out of my body like water when I'm not looking. I wake up early, dry and lifeless.

The fog follows me everywhere. Into the washroom where I bathe Ursula. Into the study/nursery where I pat her dry and change her clothes. Out into the street where I push her in Cynthia's old, refurbished pram. Large, dark blue, the kind pushed by English nannies who wear black Oxfords and wool capes.

The fog is with me when I take Ursula to her pediatrician, with whom I'm secretly in love. He's East Indian, his accent South African. Its mellifluous

cadences I'm drawn to open-mouthed as they pierce the perpetual cloud that clings to me. He is talking about feedings and schedules. I'll have to get him to repeat everything before we leave. Half-heard and unprocessed, only his inflection injected, mainlined, the words themselves are smothered into meaningless sound.

All the waiting-room talk leaves me blank as well--mothers comparing weight and inches, teeth and milestones. It's all I can do to keep up with the baby's schedule, which shifts and alters each day. There is no routine, only the anticipation of one, fluidly elusive as each ill-defined day gives way to the next.

Cynthia wants me to get out, meet with other mothers, start sharing my new life. I look up two women from pre-natal and try to make arrangements. But as the meeting time approaches, I can't seem to get myself or the baby ready. As I sit on the rocker in the baby's room trying to figure out what it is I need to take, the grace period between feedings drips and elapses, and it becomes too late to bother going.

I realize there's something I'm missing here that the other mothers have gotten wind of. I must recreate myself to become like one of them; young mother at home with child. I must dress the part.

It begins harmlessly enough, in a shoe store. Cynthia's home with Ursula but she needs to be somewhere by four. It's two forty-five, and I'm on Bloor Street near Yonge and I can't make up my mind about shoes. Is this what new mothers wear? They're black loafers, flat and inoffensive. And yet, as I turn my heel towards the mirror, something prevents me from buying them.

The salesclerk is eyeing me suspiciously. How can anyone take so long to decide? In the time I've been here (has it really been an hour?) she's moved from helpful to edgy to downright exasperated. She looks at me as if I'm not quite in my right mind. In the meantime, she has waited on several other customers. Over the cash, as she punches in their purchases, I catch her expression--it's flicking me out of the store, sale or no sale.

The next day I buy a sweater which later I will return--a harmless, black-wool turtleneck.

"What's wrong with it?" the salesgirl asks aggressively.

"Nothing, really. It's just that it doesn't go with anything I have."

"Black goes with everything. Everyone should have a black turtleneck in their wardrobe."

"I guess you're right. Will you credit my Mastercard?"

I can't wait to leave the store, rid of the offending sweater, free of yesterday's purchase.

Cynthia says, "You need new clothes. You buy things, then you ask me to baby-sit while you return them. This is craziness, Andrea."

But I don't have enough brain left to be crazy. To be crazy, there has to be mental activity--heightened activity. In my case, there isn't any--just flattened rubber bands, broccoli stems.

To confirm this, on yet another Cynthia-freed afternoon, I go down Yonge Street to the Church of Scientology and take their free I.Q. test. There are six pages of multiple-choice questions. I look at each question and the possible answers. All of them look right. In fact, I'm certain you could defend any choice of a, b, c, or d. Though I'm only on the third question, the man who's administering the test comes back out. He seems worried, though I'm not sure why. But when he takes my incomplete paper, his expression changes as if to say, "It's O.K., you don't have to sign up or buy anything. We have a policy here about taking advantage of morons."

I walk back up Yonge Street to the Bloor subway. In a week of afternoons, I've returned everything I've bought since the birth, including a pair of pin-striped culottes I've worn to the movies once.

I take refuge in my grey cords, leftovers from College, and a cobalt blue sweater that Cynthia has bought me and that I don't have the heart to return. I hate cobalt blue.

My hair is thin like my smoke-filled body. My face is pale and my features are flat.

There is only one thing that I can't return.

There are people I see, or rather people who come by to gape. People from high school who are years away from having children of their own but who marvel that one of them has entered the whole childbearing process.

How have they found out?

Some have heard through the grapevine that has begun its gnarled and clingy growth through the city.

Cynthia sees fit to inform some of the friends she and Jake shared, friends she hasn't seen in years. "People have to be told, Andrea. And there is a certain

way of doing it." She takes out her gold-rimmed stationery and black-ink fountain pen and scratches through a stack of cards late into the evening.

Whom she's chosen to inform I lose track of. I never get the complete list. She doesn't actually work from a list, more a pattern. Her former alliances are linked in her mind like heavy necklace beads, long ago discarded. Though she remembers the joy she once had in them.

So the gapers have heard through their parents. Or have seen me pushing Ursula from the park, bumped into me on their way home from work, or law school, asked the usual questions and moved on.

They are all getting on with their lives because that is the thing that must be done. At least that is what my vestigial brain tells me. Although it's difficult to imagine ever possessing the energy required to do such a thing.

I push Ursula through the yellow streets of Moore Park. Mid-autumn light fades quickly in the late afternoon, and it gets dark as we approach Cynthia's street.

I will feed Ursula supper trying to remember what the doctor has said about pablum and formula. My milk supply has been decreasing steadily for weeks. I no longer bother putting Ursula to my breast because she will only

cry in frustration. So I give her a bottle of taupe-coloured fluid and put her to bed.

She will fall asleep on her own, without any help. I place her in the crib, and she looks up at me briefly. Then she rolls onto her side. When I close the nursery door, her eyes are still open but she makes no sound.

I go downstairs and pick up a book I have started before Ursula was born. It has big spaces between sections. I overlook the words and read the spaces, flipping through the book from space to space. Then I go back to the beginning, back to the original space.

Eventually, I will go back upstairs and get into bed. I will sleep without covers though the night is cool because I can no longer bear to have anything on top of me. I will stare at the ceiling and read the cracks, which will have changed in shape from the night before. Then I'll lie on my side like Ursula in the next room.

But sleep won't come to me as it does to her. Or it will come in segments which I must work hard to earn. I will sleep half the night then be awake again till dawn. Anxiety doesn't wake me. I am simply awake, and the bed feels like a harsh and stupid place. And yet where would I go at a quarter to three?

Ursula's breathing can no longer be heard through the walls. Now it is just her eyes I hear. They are large

and blue and make so much noise it's a wonder anyone in the city is sleeping.

Chapter 12

The doctor is worried about Ursula's progress. She's already six months old and can't sit by herself yet.

"What do doctors know," scoffs Cynthia. "None of you walked until you were two."

Cynthia won't hear anything less than praise for Ursula. She is her prize grandchild, for whom nothing is good enough. Cynthia leaves in the morning empty-handed and returns in the evening with parcels.

She buys Ursula new outfits, more stuffed animals for the crib, velvet dresses. Christmas approaches. Occasionally, on Sunday afternoons, she will take her in the pram to an open-house showing. Ursula is such a good placid baby. She will either sleep or sit quietly on Cynthia's lap, and the prospective buyers are always charmed.

"Children make a home," she tells them.

There are other things that Ursula can't do. She doesn't reach for objects that I hang over her crib. During her wakeful periods, she doesn't play with her

toys. She just watches them. I watch her watch them. I don't want to do things for her. I want to see her try on her own. She looks at me, then at the rattle. She loves the colour, it seems, and the sound it makes when I pass it to her. But she has no desire to shake it herself.

Ursula sits in her car seat and smiles. Her eyes are still, large and blue, her skin soft and plump.

"Such a happy baby," people remark as I take her down the street. But I know something is wrong.

I know because it is all too easy. Other mothers at the doctor's office go on about how their babies won't nap and how they're into everything. Ursula takes long naps in the day but is still in bed for the night by seven.

She is calm, placid, and never complains. She sits and admires. Then, she sleeps.

I push Ursula to a nearby bookstore and weave the huge cumbersome pram through the narrow aisles. We reach the section of baby and child-care books. The owner squints disapprovingly behind his tortoise-shell glasses as he prices a set of volumes. But I'm the only customer in the store and we haven't disturbed anything yet.

I flip through new books on early infancy. There are pictures of babies months younger than Ursula grabbing at

suspended objects and one of a boy just a little bit older already pulling himself up. I flip, read out of sequence, try to absorb entire sections whole. Inevitably they fuse and blend, and I leave with bits of information pressed against my eyelids.

Cynthia says, "You don't want a textbook baby."

Cynthia says, "Stimulation? You'll only make her hyperactive."

Cynthia says, "Ursula is just fine. Put those books away."

It must be at night, after I've gone to bed, that Cynthia takes down the crib gyms I've strung across Ursula's bed. Because when I get her in the morning all the toys have been removed, except the mute stuffed animals at her feet.

Perhaps Cynthia is right. There is nothing wrong and I should stop trying to chart her progress. And yet each time I have to rouse Ursula for supper, fear swims through my veins. Liquid poison.

The fog has pushed me down a dark hole, deep and narrow. The earth wraps around me so that the diameter of the hole is the breadth of my shoulders.

Cynthia says, "There is no hole. Everything is fine."

Others, the gapers, push in dirt as they go by. "How did you get pregnant anyway, in the 1980s?"

Soon I will need a straw to breathe.

Occasionally I go out to the movies with Andrew. He is a delivery man by day and a film buff by night. He takes me to double bills of his favourite directors at repertory cinemas in the west end of the city.

Though the images on the screen float by my eyes incoherently, their colours and sounds calm me. They muffle the fear. By the end of the show, I have only a vague sense of disquiet, like something smouldering, extinguishable, not yet ablaze.

One evening we go for coffee afterwards. I want to check in on the baby, but it's too late to phone. And I know that Ursula always sleeps through.

Andrew is talking excitedly about the movie, rubbing his palms against his thighs.

"Wasn't the desert sequence fabulous? I mean that purple sun. Cinematic genius!"

We've ordered Italian coffees in honour of the director, cappuccino for me, espresso for Andrew. His thick fingers dwarf the tiny cup as he brings the coffee to his lips. He uses his other hand to wipe the film from his mouth, then continues.

I listen quietly, occasionally contributing a superlative. I can't let on, even to Andrew, that I didn't understand anything, that I absorbed nothing. All just moving pictures and people speaking in foreign tongues, the subtitles a train of meaningless letters appearing in cursory flashes on the screen. I light a cigarette and inhale deeply. Andrew's pace slows to mine.

"What is it, Andrea?"

It rises like a giant fish, surfacing suddenly from inside me, something the depths can no longer contain. Andrew's expression signals its magnitude, but it will no longer be suppressed.

"There are days, Andrew, I'm pushing the baby along the St. Clair bridge when I think the only way out is to take her over it."

Andrew puts down his cup. He is staring at a monster. "You can't mean that, Andrea."

But it's out now and there is no point in denying it. "Yes, Andrew, I do. I really do. I can't think of any way out of the hole but something that drastic. Some days

I fantasize about just the pram going over. But most days it's the two of us."

"I can't hear this, Andrea. This is crazy. You have a beautiful daughter."

Andrew is frantically searching for his car keys. He drops bills on the table and gets up. I follow him out to the car. We drive in silence back to the house, the confession slapping its scaly tail between us. When we get to Cynthia's, Andrew grips the back of the seat and turns to me.

"Listen, Andrea. If I were you, I'd never repeat to anyone what you said to me back in the restaurant."

I nod and listen. Anything to put the fish back into the water.

"You need help, Andrea."

I nod and nod. But infanticide is not for therapists --police and handcuffs are its domain.

Andrew keeps his eyes fixed on me. They prevent me from leaving. We stay parked in front of Cynthia's saying nothing. I have to convince him now that I'm not dangerous, that I won't smother my child in her sleep.

"I think about it, Andrew. That's not the same as doing it."

Now it is Andrew who is nodding and gripping my hand.

"Please, I should go in."

Finally Andrew lets go of my hand and I go inside. I peek into the living room because a light has been left on, but Cynthia hasn't waited up. I sit down on the couch and light a cigarette. Then another. I smoke and smoke. Smoke away the memory of confession. Smoke away the death fantasy that visits me every day.

Then in a brief glimpse of clarity that comes like hope, I am reminded of something months old. I look for it under the couch and on the bookshelves, but it's not there. Then the place comes to me. Cynthia's large cupboard. She has put it away and meant to give it to me but has forgotten.

It is there with everything else. The package that Andrew delivered the day Ursula was born with my name and address in black anonymous type. I open it to find a large Russian doll. This in turn I open until there are six dolls lined up before me. Wrapped tightly around the middle doll are crisp multi-coloured bills. Swiss Francs in large denominations, enough money to carry me several months. And a note that reads, "For you and the kid. Cheers. T."

And then for the first time since Ursula was conceived I know what to do.

Chapter 13

I rent an apartment in the Annex, a small two-bedroom overlooking Sibelius Park. A horrible tragedy has occurred in this park not too long ago--a young girl gone missing. . . .

In the bright snow of mid-January, mothers in neon-coloured ski jackets push their toddlers on the swings. Beyond the playground a flat patch of grass has been flooded where boys and men play shinny on a makeshift rink. Down the asphalt path that bisects the park, dog-walkers in buckskin coats are led briskly by their greyhounds or setters. The kidnapping happened, because everyone remembers it though nothing of it lingers. None of the mums look over their shoulders as they push, there is no aura of fear or warning, there are no discernible remnants of any kind. Then again, what are the odds of another child's ending up piecemeal in an icebox?

I have left Ursula with Cynthia. The morning I told my mother that I was leaving, she acted as if she had always anticipated this. As if my going and the baby staying was what should have happened all along, as if she

had been wondering what had taken me so long to come to this decision.

As in all matters, she doesn't insist on details. She doesn't ask about means. When I mention the parcel, she claims not to remember putting it away. All she says as I stand in the hall waiting for the cab is, "This is the best. This is the best."

She repeats it mantra-like till I'm almost convinced myself and the surly horn of the taxi draws me away. Cynthia is holding the baby as I step outside. When I close the car door behind me, I see Ursula waving.

It occurs to me as the taxi drives down Mount Pleasant that waving at her age is quite advanced.

I keep the apartment sparse. A foam mattress on my bedroom floor covered by an Afghani comforter I find in one of the shops along Bloor Street. An overturned crate for nighttable and a small lamp. The living room is completely carpeted in a terrible brown shag. But it solves the problem of throw rugs and makes the apartment feel not quite so bare. The apartment is on the second floor of a three-storey house facing west. Like so many other houses along these streets, it has been renovated in a hurry by a landlord eager to catch the latest real

estate wave, capitalise on the renewed renter interest in his neighbourhood.

When I shop at the late-night grocer, I bump into acquaintances who don't know about Ursula. With them I can perfect my new demeanour--breezy. We chat about the latest movie, who's back in town, the price of produce. I know the hole is real, since it constricts my shoulders. But I can pretend it's air, not dirt, I'm breathing, and I can fool a lot of people.

Andrew comes by in the evening. We drink red wine, watch the evening sky turn yellow then grey, and make love on the brown shag in a different spot each night.

Andrew supports my decision. "You can visit her anytime."

But I don't. Ever.

I try to forget about Ursula just as I try to forget everything.

I begin all over again. I find work in one of the cafes on Bloor. There is no food preparation involved as there was in Montreal, just serving. The kitchen is tiny, like the menu, and filthy. But because it is tucked away in the far back corner of the restaurant, its chaos is contained. None of it leaks into the front where a carefully orchestrated Milanesque bustle makes this one of the more popular places on the strip. Here all the

servers wear black and white. I study the other waitresses, how they wear their hair--henna red and short --their clothes--mock tuxedo shirts, pleated pants, thick artist sandals--lips--a deep red.

They are beautiful in an arty thin unkempt way--easy enough to mimic if you've got an eye. I switch to unfiltered French cigarettes and cut my hair short. I deliver witticisms with the cappuccinos and become a favourite among the regulars. They comment on my pierced nose, my burgundy hair. To some I give out my number.

When spring returns, I take new lovers, a different one each night. I can't really distinguish between them. They all feel the same, fill the same holes. It's the carpet beneath us as we fuck that concerns me most. With them I explore each strand, compare texture and shape. Under the dining-room window the carpet is rougher and stands more on end. Our bodies' moisture softens it a little, plies each fibre till our patch when we've finished looks like flattened grass.

In the centre of the living room, the carpet is soft and smooth. I grab bunches of it with my toes, squeeze its synthetic plushness against the balls of my feet, press my breasts and palms against it. The carpet is really a forest hiding prized objects between its strands. Its geography is pliant and I comb it for answers. It

creates shapes on the backs of my lovers that I read like braille. The messages are different each night.

Then in the late morning, I cross the park on my way to work. Now that the good weather has finally come, there are lots of babies, and several toddlers build tunnels in the sand. City gardeners have planted brightly coloured petunias and impatiens. All menace has been eliminated by landscape. I move out of the way of an approaching tricycle race, light a Gauloise, and send a stream of blue smoke behind me.

None of my lovers stay the night. My bed is too small for two, and the shag is too uncomfortable for sleeping. These men don't mind. They like the sex, but the sparseness of the apartment makes them nervous. And they sense that no breakfasts are ever made or eaten here.

They see me the next day at the cafe, and they expect to make plans. But by morning I've forgotten their name. Some try to make me jealous by hitting on other waitresses. Others, more hot-blooded, make scenes in foreign tongues. The owner is Italian, so I make sure not to take any Calabrians home--only those from countries with languages he doesn't understand. The troublemakers soon move on, across or down the street. Enrico won't put up with any of that.

It never occurs to him to question me about these incidents. He surely knows but never says a word, only smiles from behind the espresso machine when I come to place my orders.

Does Enrico want a piece of the brown shag? In the bathtub I think of him after the night's lover has left. I could never invite him. A boss isn't something I want to get rid of in the morning. Still, those large arms and chest give me pause. In the tub I spread my legs in offering to his conjured presence, dunk my head backwards and submerge.

I leave open for Andrew Tuesday nights, when movies are cheap.

"You're playing with a loaded gun, Andrea."

We are curled together in the wing chair, the only piece of living-room furniture I've relented to buy.

"Aren't you at the very least worried about getting pregnant?"

But what Andrew doesn't understand is that this body will never conceive again. It has produced its one precious stone and now its creative powers have been sealed shut. In concrete. Nothing living will come from it again.

A siren screams down Dupont Street. Through the open window a gust of night breeze enters and Andrew shudders.

There are rumours of a disease, a plague that has hit the city. Andrew wraps his arms tightly around me. And for a while we sleep.

Chapter 14

Then one morning I am jolted awake by the sound of a voice booming through the apartment. I rush into the living room but there is no one. Only the red message light of the answering machine is flashing.

It's my mother's voice and she's saying something about Ursula. I pick up the phone and the machine gives an ear-piercing whine of feedback.

"I'm here, I'm here."

"Andrea?"

"Yeah. Let me just turn off the machine." I find the dial switch, then scramble for a cigarette.

"Ursula's birthday's coming up." She pauses. "I'm planning a party for her. Just a few friends from the neighbourhood. I was wondering if you would join us."

The earth has hardened to clay around my chest. I hardly know how to speak.

"I'll think about it," is all I can muster.

"Don't you even want to know how she is?"

"I'm going to be late for work. I'll call you back."

The week before Ursula's birthday, I experience acute chest cramps, but I can't take time off work. It is June and business has doubled. The cafe is brimming with pale customers who, having emerged from a long winter, find vindication on our bald concrete patio in the sun. Two waitresses are on holiday and I agree to work double shifts to help Enrico out. Between the long luncheoners and the after-dinner crowd, there is a brief lull when I take refuge in the cool darkness of the back and breathe out some of the pain.

Enrico sits down beside me and bums a smoke. In one afternoon, he and I have prepared and served forty-six cappuccinos, twenty-two espressos, fifteen cafe lattes, twelve goblets of Italian ice cream, and twenty-nine slices of cake. These I have delivered to the tables with a mixture of reverence and disgust for such elaborately caloric creations, serving from the hip, as far away from my face as possible.

Nourishment and pain relief come from the end of a cigarette which turns a pronounced crimson as I draw in its anaesthetising smoke.

"You really look like you should take tomorrow off. I can get my sister to come in."

This is Enrico's second offer today but he says it this time regretfully. We make an efficient team, and the

end of a busy shift together is accompanied by a smug sense of accomplishment. His sister gets along with everyone, but the meaning of hurry she doesn't understand.

Enrico's large arms rest against the marble table-top like offerings. He brushes the ashes of his cigarette against the sides of the glass ashtray, smoothing and sculpting out the tip to a pencil point. For a large man he has beautifully tapered fingers, the white nails smooth and trimmed. Though I would prefer to work through the next day, I relent and take Enrico up on his offer.

I wake to the frenetic sound of robin and chickadee and bright hot sun. It is only seven a.m., but already the heat presses against the temples of the city. I move slowly to the bathroom and shower off morning sweat. There is temporary relief in the cool energizing spray, but in this heat it lasts only seconds.

Today is Ursula's birthday. A sharp-edged memory of the date punctures a doughy layer of amnesia. There's no choice about the party. I have to go. I take the diamond stud out of my nose and apply a thick coat of make-up to my skin. With concealer I lighten the shadows under my eyes. I brush my teeth three times. Then I head out in search of a gift.

I end up in Yorkville, where I sight the present before even entering a shop. Parked on the sidewalk

outside a toy store is a large battery-operated bear who is blowing a stream of soap bubbles into the air. Though the day is heavy and humid, the bubbles take easy flight, suggesting a puff of wind that no one can feel. They dance in the air intact and fluorescent in a continuous stream blown through the magic wand of the bear.

At the counter an older woman is adding price tags to toys.

"How much is the bear?" I ask. She doesn't seem to hear. "Excuse me, the bear outside?"

She peers up from her pricing. She is a handsome woman who has aged elegantly, her eyes still a bright blue, her silver hair tied back tightly in a large black velour bow.

"Oh, the bear's not for sale." She leaves the counter to return toys to their various shelves. I follow behind her. "I'm prepared to pay a lot for the bear. Give me a price."

"You don't seem to understand." She is attempting to mask her annoyance with busyness, arranging packaged toys on hangers. "The bear brings in most of our customers. Well, like yourself. But we do have lots of other stuffed bears for sale. Over there." She points to a corner of the store where several oversized Paddington Bears lean against the wall.

"I'll give you four hundred dollars for the bear." My offer floats momentarily in the air like the bear's fluorescent bubbles.

"Let me speak to the manager." She disappears downstairs. For a split second I consider grabbing the bear and making a run for it. But the saleswoman returns too quickly.

"I'm sorry. She won't hear of it."

My offer suddenly seems obscene. I look at the bear through the sliding glass door of the store. Its steady stream of bubbles has continued, unperturbed by the negotiations within. It seems absurd now to ever have considered dislodging it.

I settle on a large Paddington, traditionally dressed: yellow hat, pale blue duffle coat, shiny red plastic boots. Then hail a cab to Cynthia's.

Multi-coloured balloons have been tied to the handrail of her front step. I get out of the cab and clutch the bear tightly. It has been six months since I left. From the doorstep I can hear the muffled sound of people talking and laughing, a strange unfamiliar sound coming from this house.

I ring the doorbell twice, but no one answers. So I let myself in. There are at least nine children under the age of three in Cynthia's living room. Some are chasing

balloons, others are trying to pull themselves up onto the couch. I don't recognize any of the mothers. They are obviously much closer in age to me than to Cynthia but somehow seem of her generation. Something in the way they are dressed. Casual but well-heeled. Italian leather sandals, long flowery skirts, raw silk tops.

Because of the humidity, my cotton dress has ridden up my thigh. I tug surreptitiously at its hem and scan the room for Cynthia and Ursula. They aren't anywhere. I place Paddington down in the hall and stand at the threshold of the room, waiting. A woman in a floral-patterned summer dress turns around and looks at me. Then she smiles wanly. "Hello." She extends a hand in my direction over the head of a toddler who has wrapped himself around her ankles.

I begin. "I'm..." But a hand has been placed on my shoulder and its owner completes the sentence for me. "This is my daughter, Samantha, Ursula's aunt."

I turn around to face Cynthia. She is holding Ursula, who is wearing a nautical dress, red, white, and blue, with a large sailor's bow slung over her shoulders. She looks at me briefly, her eyes almost as deep a blue as the bow on her dress, then huddles into Cynthia's shoulder.

"She hasn't seen her aunt for a while," Cynthia explains to the woman in the floral dress, whose name I forget as soon as I'm told it. Cynthia looks at me directly, her unswerving gaze upholding the lie she has just uttered. I try to construct from this one lie what Cynthia has told these people about Ursula's parents. No one would mistake Cynthia for the mother.

Cynthia takes me around the circle of guests, and I look for clues in their faces, deduce what I can from their reactions. "Cynthia didn't tell me she had a daughter in the city," says one of them over the screams of her two-year-old who is strapped to her like a koala bear.

I am a blank that has come to life in Cynthia's living room, spontaneous generation, a sea monkey. I navigate the party like a maze. Some know Cynthia and Ursula from a play group, others from the moms and tots swim program at the local pool. Through snatches of broken conversations, I attempt to piece together an Ariadnean thread that will trace the pattern of the last six months.

Cynthia takes Ursula to the couch, where they begin to open the mound of presents she has received. There are picture books and pull-toys, trucks and wooden cars. Admiring a book, Ursula bites her bottom lip

contemplatively. She has several teeth. They have sprung up magically, fully formed. She had none the day I left. She looks around the room smiling at her guests, at the balloons that have slipped down from the walls, at the bubbles that the older children are blowing. Cynthia is taking photos of her surrounded by ribbon and wrapping paper and by other toddlers who have come to try out the presents.

"Sam," Cynthia calls over to me. "Would you like to bring in the cake?" She motions in the direction of the pantry. The cake is homemade, glazed with a thick strawberry red icing, like the ones Cynthia made when we were children. There is one large numerical candle stuck in the middle, green and white striped. I light it, then begin the short procession back to the living room. I try to sing, but the words are dry and unmelodious in my throat. The moms have joined in by the time I reach the birthday girl. Cynthia helps Ursula blow out the candles.

After the last guest has left, I help Cynthia clean up. Ursula has fallen asleep on the couch in the middle of discarded wrapping paper.

"I could hardly tell them who you really were." Cynthia is stuffing abandoned party favours into a large green garbage bag. She doesn't look at me.

"So what has happened to Andrea?"

"She's on tour with a show in the States."

"What will you be telling them next year?"

Cynthia doesn't answer, just continues to dump half-eaten pieces of cake, paper plates, and plastic cups into the bag. Then she places all the presents on a large tray and carries them upstairs.

I watch my sleeping daughter on the couch, the rise and fall of her small chest, her plump wrists and calves. Her brown hair is down to her neck now. In her party dress and leather shoes she's no longer a baby but a little girl. I have missed half her life. She no longer belongs to me. Parenthood, like anything, can expire.

Now it's clear to me why Cynthia invited me. I put Paddington beside the couch so that Ursula will see him when she wakes. Then I leave.

Chapter 15

In the dream Samantha and I are little and Teddy isn't yet born. Dressed identically in corduroy jumpers, striped T-shirts, and orange running shoes, we are playing tag. Cynthia is home-free. Sam chases me around the rectangular plot, and when I'm winded I reach for Cynthia's legs, sturdy as two lean tree trunks.

"You can't hold onto Mum forever," wails Sam. "There's a ten-second limit at home." She starts to count and my grip loosens and dissolves. My hands start to fade, then my arms and shoulders, till I've disappeared altogether, an invisible voice. There are slight variations to the dream. Sometimes I let go of the legs, and when I reach for them again, it is they that have evaporated joint by joint.

It is this recurring dream that has led me to book a flight to Vancouver. When I phoned to ask if I could come, Samantha didn't hesitate to say yes, as if she had been thinking along the same lines herself.

Enrico hires a temporary replacement, which allows me a month if I need it. It is the middle of July and the

weather in Toronto is hot and muggy. The humidity sticks to the skin like spilt juice. There is relief at the air-conditioned airport where I wait to board the evening flight to the Coast. The trip is four hours, but with a three-hour time change in our favour we cross the country, by our watches at least, in an hour.

When we land, it is still sunny. Through the sliding glass doors the deep blue coastal mountains form a protective arc around the city. The air smells of beach and forest, which the evening breeze blends into something distinct, like the breath of a sleeping sea creature.

Sam has given me directions because she doesn't drive. The cab winds its way into the dusk-lit city. The highway skirts the coast, which is a contemplative purple-blue in the pink evening light.

My sister lives on the second floor of a house down near the sea in Kitsilano. The taxi descends Arbutus, one in a cluster of streets named after trees. The air is different again down here. A sea breeze carries the smell of sand and plankton almost to my sister's doorstep.

I haven't seen Sam in four years, since the summer she came home after completing her degree. She and Cynthia fought constantly then. In mid-summer she left for the Coast.

A light is on in her front room overlooking the street. It is a warm, welcoming amber colour. I ring the doorbell and wait nervously on the front porch brushing at stray pieces of the straw doormat with my sandal. A car drives by and honks. Finally I hear the sound of footsteps on the stair and the door being unlocked.

My sister is standing in the darkened hallway wearing nothing but a cotton nightie. Her hair is still long but matted and unbrushed.

"Hi," she says and surprises me with a long hug. "Come on up." We pass through another door then up dark wood stairs that lead directly into her apartment. The flat is in the shape of a horseshoe. It is wrapped around the stairwell, a large empty space in the middle of the room, and I step gingerly for the first little while. Straight ahead is an alcove kitchen, to the right a living room, to the left her bedroom with its amber light, and at the back a storage room where my sister places my bags.

"I have a trundle bed in the closet. We can set it up later."

My sister leads me into the living room, where she picks up her drink. "I can only offer you a gin." I nod. She retrieves a half-empty bottle from the kitchen cupboard and pours two or three ounces over ice. Then she joins me on the couch. I look at her from the corner of

my eye. She doesn't seem much older than when she left, but there's a muted quality to her face that I haven't remembered. Her features are less sharp and distinguished, or they seem so in this light.

In the corner wastepaper basket is a large metallic potato chips wrapper. Cheesy dust on the coffee table.

"What time do you have to be up for work tomorrow?"

My sister adjusts her nightie over her ankles and looks out the window.

"Oh, I quit my job a while back."

"What are you living on, then?"

"Jesus, Andrea. Is that why you came out West, to interrogate me about my life?"

"It seemed like a normal enough question." I grab the bottle which she's left on the coffee table and pour more gin into my glass.

"I'm sorry," she says at last. "I've had a difficult winter."

I look past her shoulder to the stairwell. Though the door has been closed and locked at the bottom, the open stairs seem to make it possible for anyone to just walk in off the street by mistake. The light fades and we sit in semi-darkness. We are close enough to the beach to hear the evening whisper of the tide, the slumbering breath of the sea below.

Chapter 16

Our first week together is spent doing things for the house. We stock the fridge and buy house plants. We turn the storage area into a bedroom, find a cover for the trundle bed, blinds for the windows.

We go to vegetarian restaurants then try to replicate their recipes at home. I teach my sister how to stir-fry tofu. I fill her cupboards with tamari and tahini, sweet brown rice, amasake. We sit crossed-legged around the coffee table eating fried udon and kale, sipping on rice wine late into the evening.

Sometimes we walk down to the beach after dinner to sit and stare out at the shifting colours of the ocean. A lot of people come down here at night to wade, throw Frisbees, play music. The beach vibrates with nervous movement and the thrill of expectation. Knapsacks stuck behind logs tell us that many are just passing through.

I take off my sandals and curl my toes in the sand. We have lived apart so long, Sam and I, that I have to get to know her all over again. Mentally flipping through Cynthia's photo albums, I try to think of happy moments

that bound us together as children. But I can only summon up the pictures that Jake took of the three of us year after year. The rest I remember were mostly shots of us individually, rarely any of the two of us together. Yet I know when we were very little Samantha and I were inseparable.

"We were best friends once, weren't we?" I am scooping up large handfuls of sand which I watch drain through my fingers.

My sister looks at me blankly. "Yes," she says. "A long time ago."

I take her hand and we step over logs and dried, sharp-edged seaweed that is scattered across the beach. My sister's hand is moist and I recognize the smell. It is the one she left to linger in the upstairs study, now Ursula's bedroom. What is it about my sister's scent that has clung so tenaciously through the years, surprisingly out of place here where it competes with the briny sea air? A scent not unlike carved oak . . . and I am reminded now of the darkly-panelled house where all our childhood is contained. I turn to Sam but her attention is drawn to some far-off point beyond the bay. Besides, the intervening years are a large gaping canyon, impossible to cross. . . .

So the warm sand beneath our feet, the pink grapefruit sky, the luminescent sea keep us steady in the present. Even the scraggly beard of the man in front of us playing his harmonica. He winks as we pass and my sister gives my arm a tug. She veers us off the beach and up the street towards home.

We settle for peace as I imagine a long-married couple would, grown too old or tired to feud. Sam doesn't ask me about Ursula, and I don't ask her about her life. We navigate these waters like deft canoeists weaving around the shoals, skirting the edges of solid rock. Yet when she pours herself coffee in the morning, why is it that her hands shake?

More and more the beach draws me. Because Sam lives here, its appeal for her has thinned, lost its urgency. But for me, the sea air carries half-remembered promises. I go early in the morning when she is still sleeping and walk along the deserted shoreline alone. In Victoria, where we went once as a family, the beach stones shone through the shallow water like giant pearls. They were bright and smooth, deep blues, golds, and greens. We gathered them hurriedly, like abandoned jewels, collecting as many as we could in the pouches we had made of our skirts. But later at home when they had dried in their

jars, they became dull and ordinary, all their sheen lost, as if their spell had been broken.

There are none of these deceptive stones on the Kitsilano beach, only the odd splintered oyster shell or sharp pebble that protrudes through the sand. When I arrive most mornings, the sun has spread a pale yellow streak of light across the sky. But in moments it rises far above the horizon and burns the hazy sky to a clear, keen blue. The quiet of the early morning soon disappears with the fog, and the city begins its relentless hum behind the trees that line the beach.

There are others like me who seek out the early morning calm, some whom I begin to recognize from evenings and mornings past. From behind the trees emerges the bearded man with the harmonica. His eyes are a deep green and his body, though dirty, is taut. He recognizes me, but I look away to unbury slivered shells from the sand. They are smooth and pearly, and I rub them like primitive charms. As he approaches me, his torso casts an elongated shadow in the sand. His silhouette is cocky and inviting, but something keeps me from turning around. He pauses for a moment as I continue to pluck at bits of shell. Then he mutters something behind me and moves on down the beach.

The days and nights leak into each other. In the horseshoe apartment the light moves from the living room to the front bedroom, and we spend our evenings in shadows.

On my second last morning, my sister joins me by the water and we head up to Fourth Avenue for breakfast. Though the street is brimming with recently opened bistros and cafes, we find a place that has managed to escape the renovation frenzy, one of the last original greasy spoons, with red leather bar stools at the counter and milkshakes that are still made in canisters. A kind of place where on a Sunday afternoon Jake might have taken us when Teddy napped and Cynthia needed an hour's peace.

Sam sits across from me taking sips of her coffee. Though she's only twenty-six, she's beginning to hunch. Her shoulders curve forward so that her chest collapses and retreats beneath them. As though her breasts were a nuisance, or eyesore, that needed to be tucked away out of sight. She catches my expression and adjusts her hair behind her ears. She sits on her hands and shifts uncomfortably in her seat. I eat quickly so that we can leave. We walk home in a silence that has callused.

That night I'm kept awake by Sam's steady breathing. She moans in her sleep, a sound that presses against the

sides of the stairwell and fills the apartment with its hovering girth.

I creep into her room, sit at the end of her bed and watch her sleep. She sleeps like someone who has always slept alone. In the middle of the bed, flat on her back. Her extended arms lie on top of the comforter, her hands closed in such tight fists that her knuckles are yellowy-white. Feature for feature, as Averie would say, Sam is beautiful. Her hair is wavy and still blond. She's inherited Jake's determined jaw, Cynthia's hazel eyes. But these are overridden or cancelled out not by temperament or Sam's inability to accentuate her strong points but by a sadness that has entered her pores and clings to her skin.

She moans again softly and I am compelled to wake her.

"Sam," I whisper. But I have to shake her by the shoulders before she rouses. Her eyes open slowly, and she stares at me bewildered.

"You were crying," I explain. "What are you dreaming about that makes you cry?"

"Who remembers dreams. Go back to sleep, Andrea."

But I stay at the edge of her bed.

"What do you want from me, Andrea?" Sam pulls herself up. "There's nothing to say, all right?" She gets out of

bed and goes to the window. The moon is especially bright, and it creates a large pool of light in the middle of the room. She sits on the ledge, her feet tucked under her nightgown, arms wrapped around her knees. She seems smaller somehow, almost like a child. Or is it because in this silver light the white of her nightie blends into the ledge, as if part of her were disappearing.

I want to reach out to her, but she surprises me with a laugh. As though she's thought of something in particular, she turns to face me. "Aren't we a pair," she says.

Chapter 17

The plane takes off and in a moment it has left the Coast and is high over the mountains. The trip always seems longer going back because of the time difference, light dimming to grey the farther east you go. Nothing will get me to her faster. So I fidget with the radio and headset, drink too much wine before the dinner trays arrive. As we fly over the prairies, checkerboard fields spreading infinitely out, something about their precise geometry gives me hope. I crane my neck towards the Great Lakes and the tiny specks of light in the distance. If all goes well and there's not too much turbulence, we will arrive in the city before dark.

THE END